OVERLORD [11] The craftsman of Dwarf Kugane Maruyama

illustration by so-bin

オーバーロード

11 山小人の工匠

丸山くがね

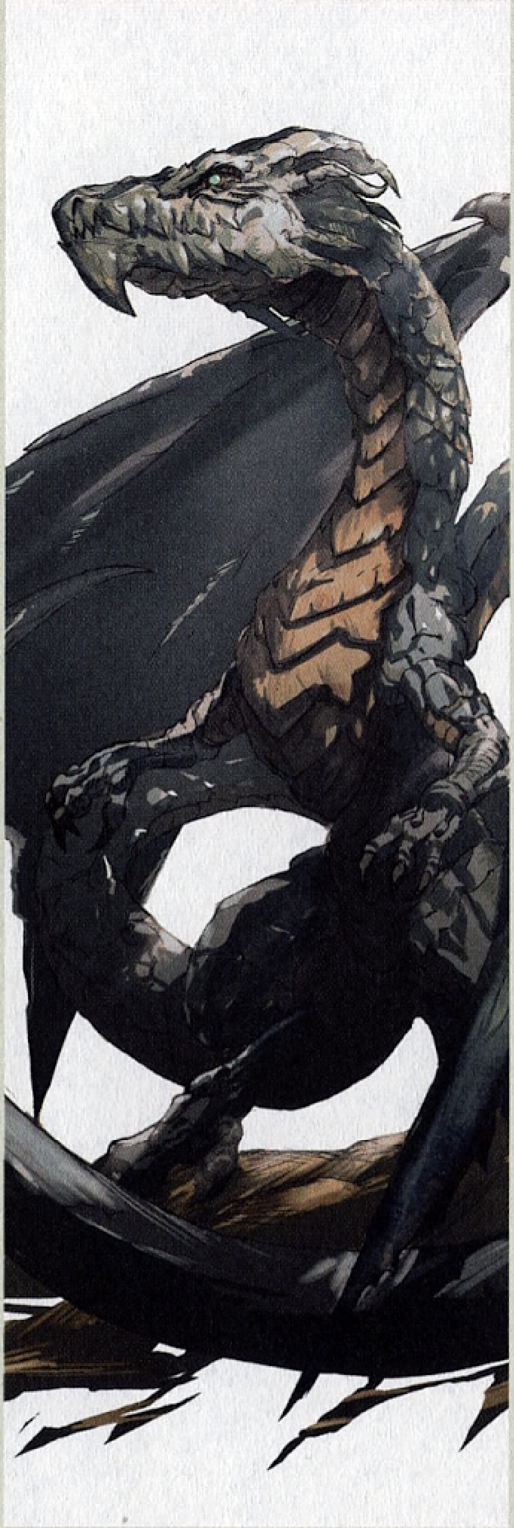
OVERLORD Ple Ple Pleiades

オーバーロード
11
山小人の工匠
特装版
Blu-ray付

オーバーロード

ぷれぷれぷれあです――なざりっく最大の危機

Character 46



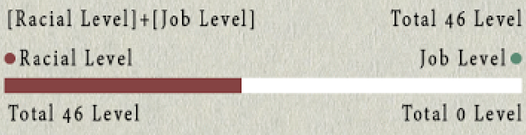
オラサーダルク=ヘイリリアル

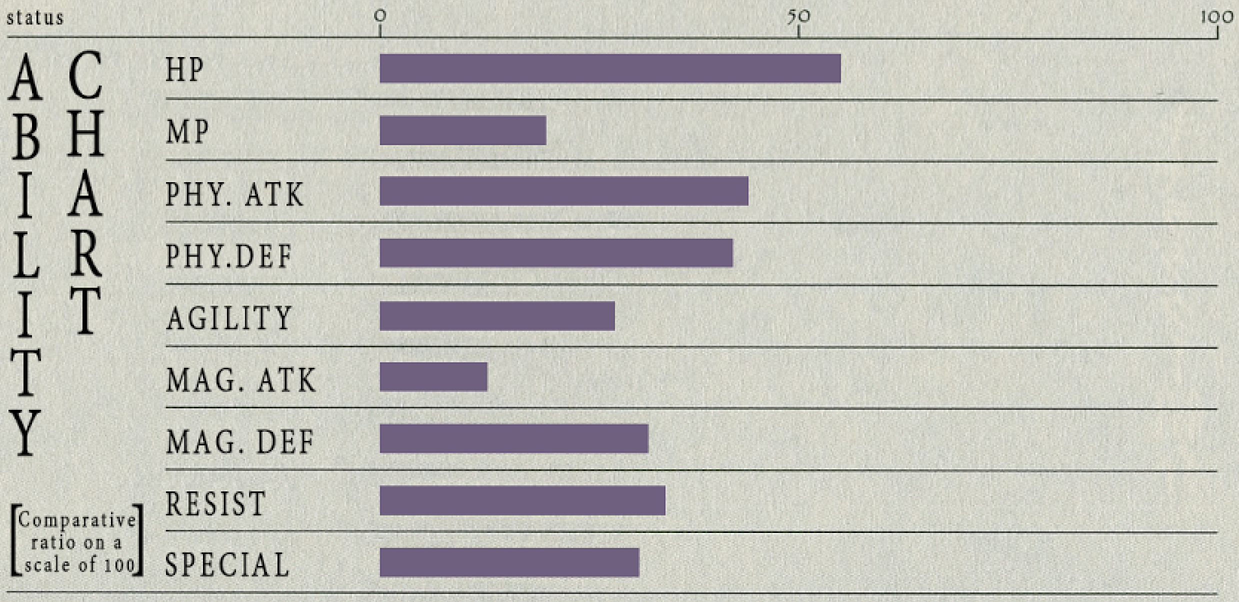
Dragon Race

olasird'arc=haylilyal

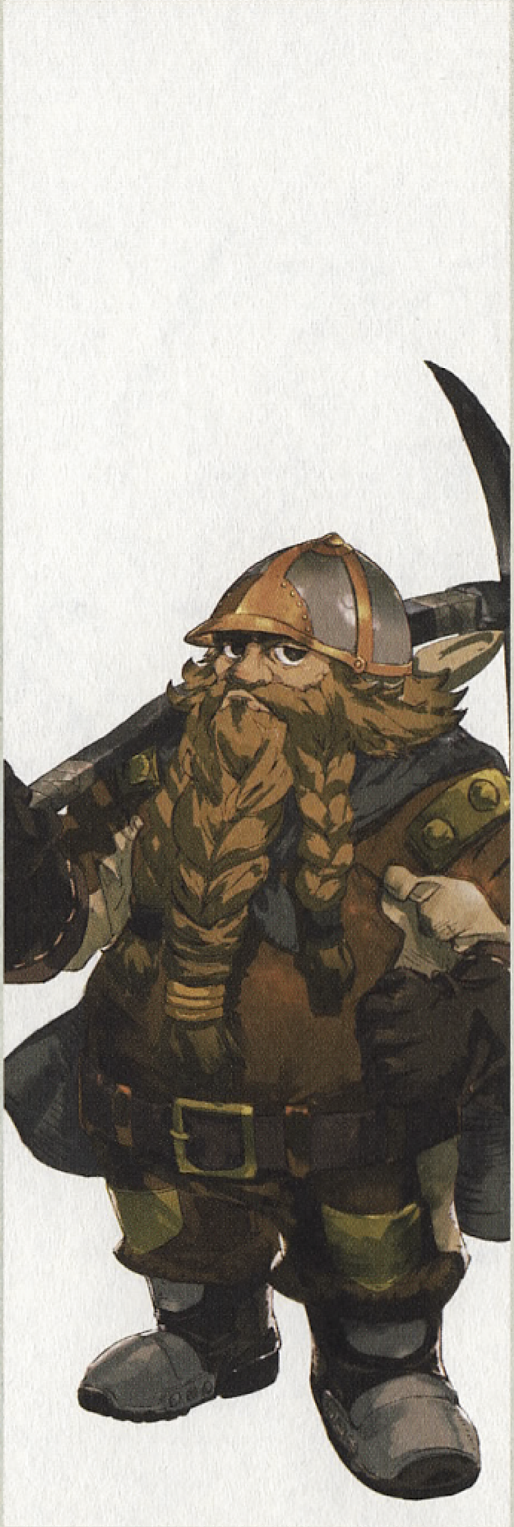
WHITE DRAGON LORD

Job	Frost Dragon Lord of the Azellisian Mountain Range	
Residence	Royal Palace of the former Dwarven city (Feoh Berkanan)	
Alignment	Neutral [Karma -25]	
Race Level	Dragonling	10lv
	Young	10lv
	Adult	10lv
	Elder	5lv
	Ancient	1lv
	Etc.	





Character 47



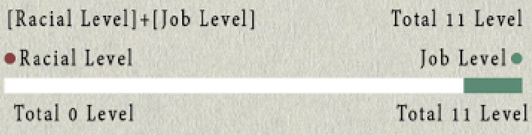
ゴンド・ファイアビド

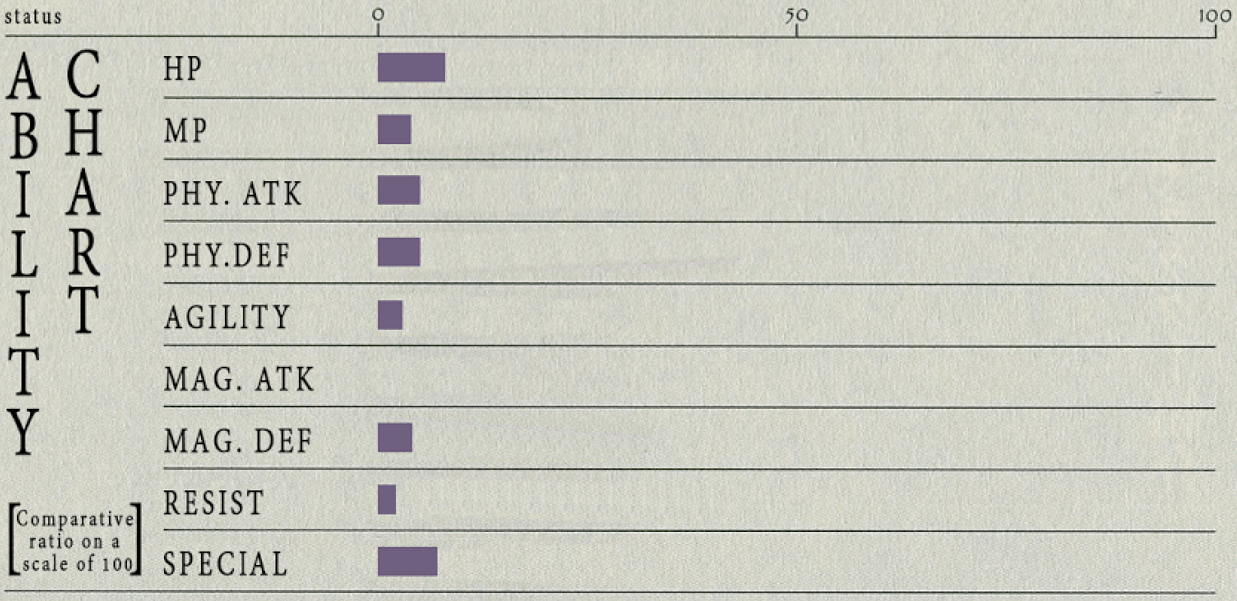
Human
Race

gondo firebeard

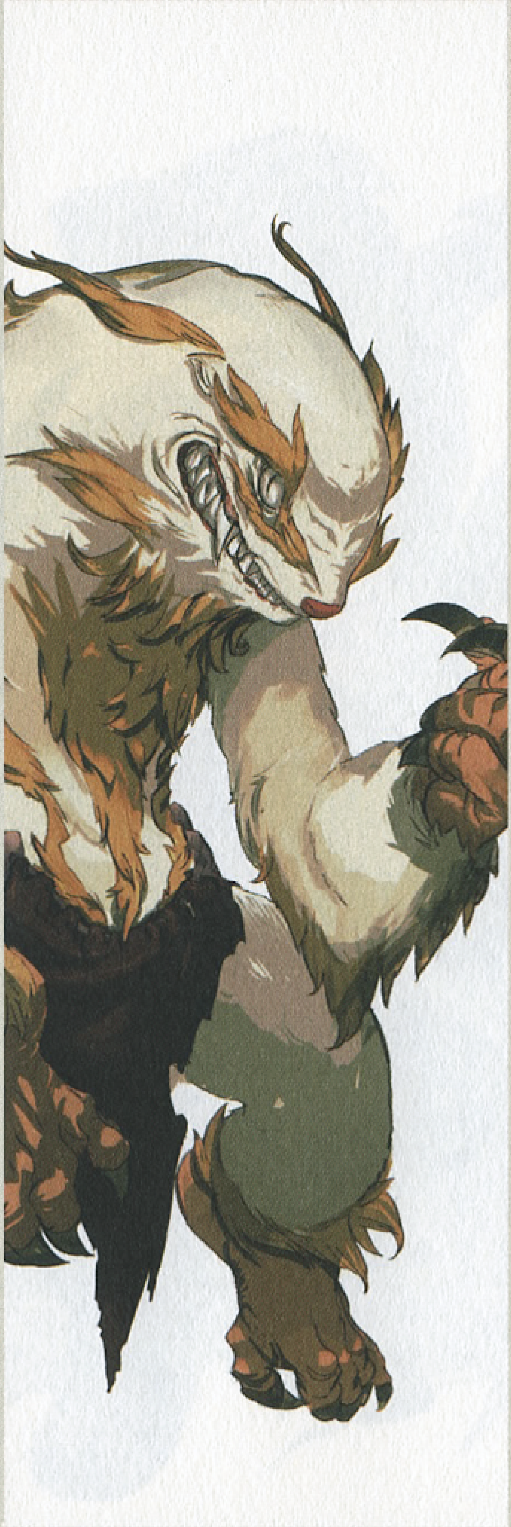
Rune Developer

Job	Part-timer (at the beginning of v11)	
Residence	Dwarven City (Feoh Ger)	
Alignment	Neutral [Karma 45]	
Race Level	Weaponsmith	4 lv
	Armorsmith	3 lv
Job Level	Itemsmith	3 lv
	Runesmith	1 lv





Character 48



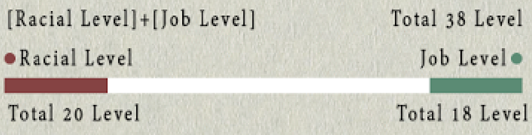
ペ・リユロ

Demi-human
Race

pe riyuro

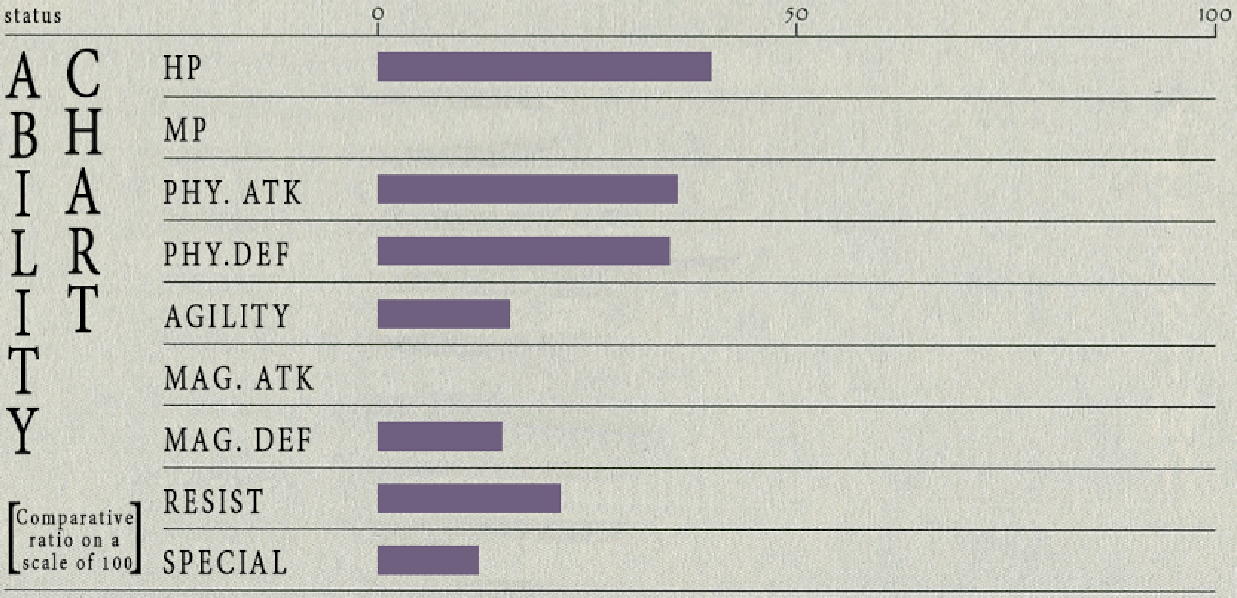
GREATEST LORD OF THE SPECIES IN HISTORY

Job	Lord of the United Quagoa Clans of thge Azellisian Mountain Range	
Residence	The former Dwarven city's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Feoh Berkanan)	
Alignment	Neutral [Karma 40]	
Race Level	Quagoa	10 lv
	Quagoa Lord	10 lv
Job Level	Emperor (normal)	2 lv
	Monk	6 lv
	Ki Master	4 lv
	Etc.	



ABILITY CHART

[Comparative ratio on a scale of 100]



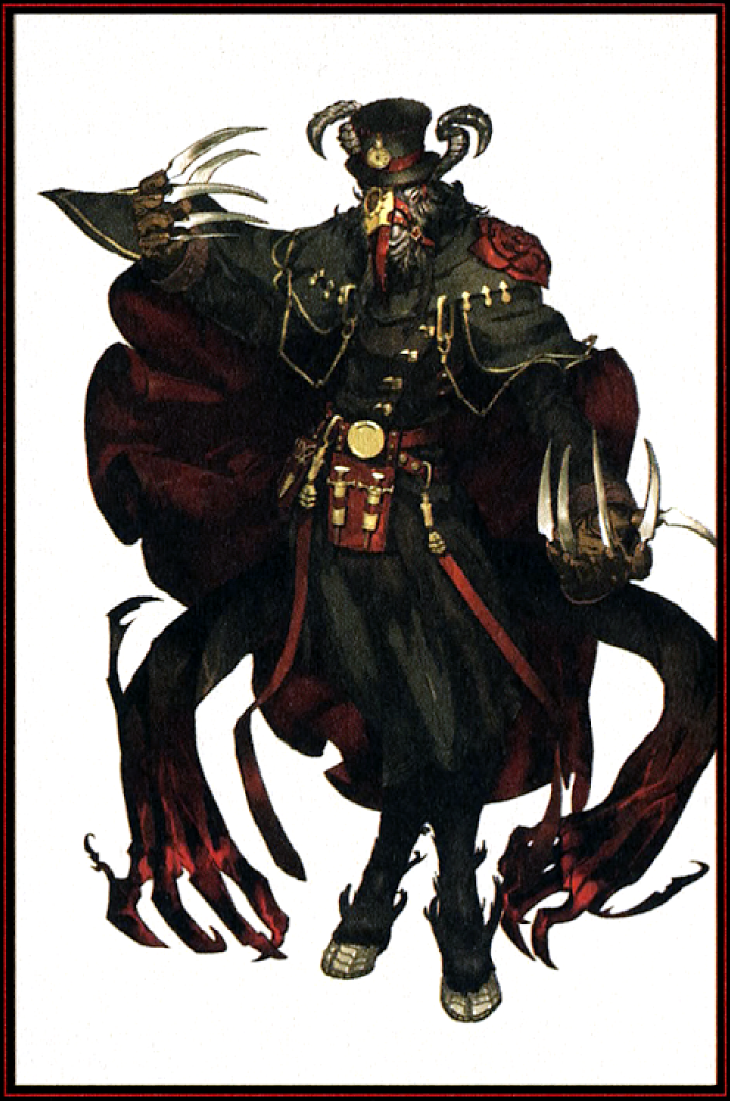
7/41

URBELT ARRAIGNING ODORU

異形種

Urbelt arraigning odoru

DEMON OF GREAT DISASTER



personal character

The man with the highest firepower of all the magic casters in the guild. He was also ranked among the top two members of the guild for burst damage. He was fascinated by the word "evil" and was often seen acting like a villain. As an aside, he did not like talking about it. In the closing moments of YGGDRASIL, he confronted a certain someone in the real world. Both of them could be considered evil.

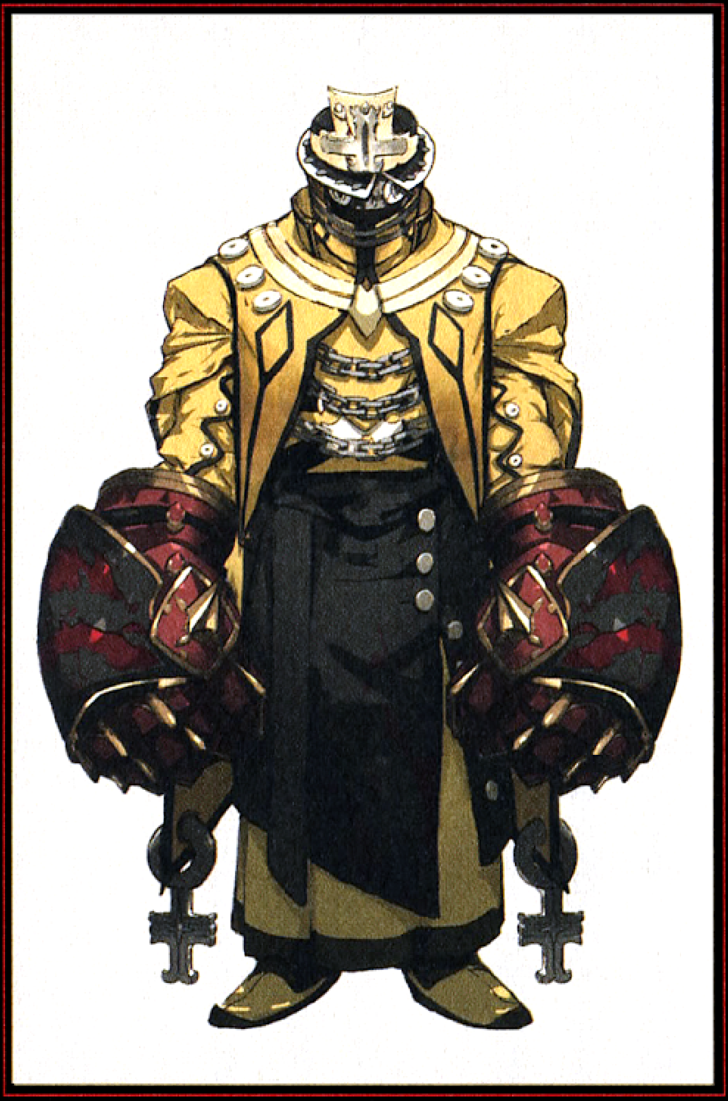
8/41

YAMAIKO

異形種

Yamaiko

MUSCLEHEAD TEACHER



personal character

A female teacher working at an elementary school in the Arcology. She had a genius sister and was compared to her in all things. However, she did not mind, given her tremendous mental fortitude. One reason for that was because her little sister deeply admired her. Everyone called her Musclehead because she said things like “I forgot my oppenent’s data, so let’s just punch them (and run away if they’re very strong)”.

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

PROLOGUE

Gondo Firebeard changed into his work clothes.

They were a set of coarsely-designed coveralls, stitched together from sturdy cloth. They stretched poorly and did not feel comfortable when worn. They were a poor choice for everyday wear. However, they were exceptionally suited for working in the mine tunnels, where conditions were poor. Putting it on might not have seemed like a big deal, but being able to wear such gear was revolutionary when one looked back on the history of the Dwarven people and how they had first worked the tunnels while practically naked.

After that, he put on a metal helmet, of the sort that light infantry might wear. The insides of the mines were very humid, and wearing it directly against the skin would be uncomfortable due to the heat and the trickling of sweat. Thus, the miners all padded the insides of their helmets with thick towels.

Finally, he put on a set of dog tags around his neck. The number 5 was inscribed onto the metal plate. It implied that he was on the final day of his five-day-on, five-day-off work regime.

In other words, Gondo would briefly be free from tomorrow onwards.

After his preparations were complete, Gondo emerged from the changing room and headed straight to the usual place, the waiting room.

Gondo squeezed between several dwarves and immediately picked out his name on the message board. There were four other names on the same row as his, and they would be Gondo's shiftmates — his working buddies for today.

Finding one's colleagues, the people with whom he would share his toil, was a piece of cake in this cramped waiting room. It would seem Gondo was the last to arrive, because his buddies had already noticed him before he could rush over.

“Ohhh! Gondo! It’s been a while!”

“Ho! Gagaiz! I'm fortunate to have you as shift leader. It’ll be good to work with you. Same goes for the others!”

“Ho, Gondo! Let’s do our best today!”

“Mm, mm. Today’s the fifth day! The last day. I’ll give it all I’ve got!”

“Ha~ I feel like slacking off~”

They chattered on like this as they left the waiting room and signed out pickaxes, shovels, and other mining tools. Then, they drew rations and refreshments — lunchboxes and two liters of water, stored in a magic item which maintained a steady temperature.

However, there was no sign of the dwarves’ beloved beverage, beer. There was no way it would be there. While it was true that the dwarves were highly resistant to alcohol and would not be intoxicated by just a few drinks, no mining boss would ever allow his prized workers to touch the demon drink while working in the dangerous tunnels.

That said—

One of the dwarves took a swig from a flask at his waist, which had not been issued to him.

“Puhaa~”

The air he exhaled was redolent with the scent of alcohol.

Neither was he the only one to do so. Gondo had several pouches like that as well.

Of course, he did not have alcohol with him. However, he had flasks of water, soup, five sticks of boiled sweets, and dwarven bread to supplement his rations.

The interior of the tunnels were hot and humid, so in addition to consuming additional calories, they had to take in extra water as well. The fact was that their issued rations were the bare minimum needed for them. Their bosses were the sort who would cut costs whenever they could.

After finishing all their preparations, they stepped up before the Dwarf who was in charge of this state-run mining tunnel.

He was seated on the other side of a counter, a creepy, sinister-looking Dwarf in glasses. He raised an eyebrow, and looked over Gondo and company.

He muttered quietly when he came to the humming Dwarf who reeked of alcohol, but in the end he did not say anything. He might have been their manager, but he was still a Dwarf, and he understood these things. Or rather, it was because Gagaiz made the first move and spoke up.

“I am Gagaiz. Where will we be digging today?”

The creepy-looking Dwarf snorted, and then turned his attention from the group to the map he was holding. Although their view was blocked by the counter, it was reasonable to assume that it was a chart which held the assignments for all the dig sites.

“You’ll be in Sector 8821.”

“8821… heatstones, then?”

Heatstones were very important things to the Dwarves.

Dwarves were a race of the earth. For the most part, they lived underground. When they used coal or firewood to produce the heat needed for warmth, cooking and smithing, it would pollute the air and make life difficult for them.

Granted, there were magic items which could cleanse the air. However, such items required druids to make, and they were regrettably rare among the Dwarves. Thus they could not mass-produce such magic items.

Therefore, they used the metal called heatstones as a replacement for those things.

Heatstones were a special kind of metal. If one struck them with a very hard metal — mithril, at the barest minimum — they would produce intense heat. The Dwarves used this curious metal like coal, and their refineries and smithies consumed vast quantities of them. Thus, one could say that heatstones were a central part of Dwarven life.

Incidentally, firewood and the like were rare in this place.

A set of metal plates hit the counter; they were permits which allowed passage in and out of the tunnels. Gagaiz threaded them onto his necklace with a dexterity one would not have expected of his stubby fingers.

After that, he studied the sheet of paper which had been passed to him. He let the others read it as well after he had verified the contents.

Soon, the paper reached Gondo's hands. As always it contained the route leading to their dig site. Gondo imprinted the location of several critical junctions into his mind. They would come in handy if they had to flee due to an emergency. After all, monsters might show up even in a Dwarven mine, so it paid to be careful about these things.

"Use the mining cart at the third junction."

"Got it. Then, let's go!"

They oiled up the manually-operated minecart at the third junction and then pushed it forward according to Gagaiz's directions. The interior of the tunnels were lit by lanterns containing naturally-glowing oil. However, those lanterns were spaced very far apart, so at times, entire sections of the tunnel were shrouded in darkness. That said, all Dwarves had darkvision, which could easily overcome the darkness. Of course, this darkvision did not have unlimited range, but it was enough to go from lantern to lantern.

Perhaps the races from the outside world would not be able to bear the sense of pressure which the tunnels imposed on its occupants. However, it had no effect at all on the underground-dwelling Dwarves. The tunnels might have seemed narrow, but they were quite spacious to the Dwarves. Given that the average height of a Dwarf was around 130cm, a tunnel of around 180cm across was broad enough for them.

Before long, the sound of footsteps came from ahead.

If they were miners like Gondo and the others, they should have heard the sound of a minecart as well. However, there was nothing of the sort. What was this, then? If it was the *patapata* of bare feet on the ground, they would have dumped everything and fled back to where they came. However, that was not the case; the footsteps sounded like they had been made with boots.

They had an idea of who might be making those sounds.

Soon, they saw a squad of Dwarves.

Gondo and the others pressed themselves to the sides of the walls so as not to impede their progress. Well, they did that, but the minecart still took up space in the middle of the tunnel, so saying that they were trying to keep out of their way was merely wishful thinking on the part of Gondo and the others.

"—Heading up? There's nothing there now, but be careful anyway."

"Ah, thanks for your concern. We're very grateful for your help."

After that brief exchange, they parted ways with Gondo's crew.

The Dwarf at their head was a tunnel doctor, a magic caster from an alternative system.

His job was to cast spells which would reinforce the ceiling and prevent chunks from falling out of it, keeping the miners from being hurt by sharp edges in the rocks they were excavating, and so on.

It was critical to shore up the tunnels due to the constant danger of their collapse, but wood — the most commonly-used material for such reinforcement — was hard to come by in the Dwarven Kingdom. Thus, tunnel doctors used their magic to strengthen the walls of the tunnels.

In addition, they could tell if they were digging too close to water or gas. With them around, the miners could work in peace, without having to worry about collapse and the like.

Behind the tunnel doctor — who had many important jobs to perform — were lightly-armored Dwarven warriors.

Tunnel doctors were not common, which was why they were escorted by four men.

After they passed each other, the sound of their footsteps faded into the distance.

Much like other Dwarven cities, the city of Fio Kula sat at the heart of several ore veins which it worked. Only the west remained unexcavated for some reason. It lay beneath the earth, under the steep slopes of several sheer peaks.

In contrast to their casual, easygoing attitudes, the Dwarves were excellent mathematicians. The many tunnels which radiated from the city like blood vessels from a heart were the product of intricate calculations, and they formed geometric works of art once they were excavated. Tracks were laid down in the larger main tunnels for minecarts, while hand-powered elevators serviced the shafts which had been sunk for vertical mining. In addition, there were the countless smaller tunnels which emanated from them. When added up, the distance these tunnels spanned easily exceeded several hundred kilometers.

Due to their size, there was no way to fully man them with guards. Even guarding every single shift of miners was beyond them. Therefore, if a monster showed up, the miners had no choice but to drop everything and flee back to the nearest critical juncture, where guards would be stationed.

Unfortunately, as the people on the surface knew well, the Dwarves all had short legs. It would take a miracle for every single person to escape with their lives.

Gondo and the others halted their minecart in the middle of the passage and activated their magical lanterns. They then proceeded into a side passage with their mining tools in hand. Their destination lay at the end of the tunnel ahead — their dig site for the day.

Gagaiz gave his orders, and the miners moved to their positions without any complaints. One to swing his pickaxe and dig, one to split the bedrock with wedges, one to shovel the earth and rock into a basket, one to carry the basket to the minecart, one to push the minecart to the spoil tip—

“All right, let’s start.”

And with that, the day’s work began.

◆ ◆ ◆

Despite their developed muscles, the countless mechanical repetitions of their work meant that their bodies craved rest the moment their labors ceased.

They stripped off their work clothes and headed to the miners-only bathhouse.

This bathhouse ran off the tremendous amount of heat given off by the gigantic crucibles of the national foundries. Though the water was not very hot, it was the perfect temperature to melt away the fatigue accumulated by their tired bodies.

Gondo filled a ladle with hot, brownish water from a basin, and then dumped it on himself with no reservation.

It would seem there was some sort of iron content in the water, and indeed, one would be able to taste something if they swilled it in their mouths.

This hot water cleansed Gondo’s body of the dirt which clung to it.

He scrubbed hard at his beard and his hair. A dwarf who did not care for and clean their beard could hardly be considered an adult.

“Oi, Gondo! How about getting a drink after this!” Gagaiz shouted as he scrubbed at himself with a towel from a stool opposite of him.

Gondo dumped more hot water on his head and settled into the hot tub before shouting back:

“Afraid I’ll have to decline! I’ve work later on which can’t be put off! Another time, perhaps!”

“Really now! What a shame! If you change your mind, come down to the White Beer Pavilion and have a cup or two with us!”

“Oh! I’ll look forward to it!”

Gagaiz then moved on to talk with his other buddies, and before anyone else could ask him out, Gondo rose from the tub with an, “I’ll be off now!” and strode off.

After towelling himself dry and putting on his clean everyday clothes, Gondo walked up to the counter with the sinister-looking Dwarf manager. He took off the necklace he was wearing and handed it over.

The manager looked it over, and then placed a pouch on the counter.

This was five days’ worth of wages. Due to the fairly high mortality rate in the mines, wages were calculated on a weekly basis. Apparently they had paid a daily rate in the past, but that led to situations where the workers did not have enough to drink at taverns. One could say that the present system was designed to cater to that sad state of affairs. While the pouch before him did contain a sizable sum, Gagaiz and the others would probably spend half of that on beer.

“...Gondo, it’s been a month, if you count today. Let me look upon your face.”

“It’s fine. There’s no problem with my breathing.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, not you.”

He picked up a handlight from the counter, and shone it at Gondo.

Gondo was not happy at the bright illumination, but he continued looking forward.

Inhaling dust particles over long durations degraded the functional capacity of one’s lungs. This caused the skin to gradually turn pale. That condition was called Whitesnow Sickness, and this examination was to see if he was showing any signs of it.

“...Hmph, you do look well.”

“That disease causes strange sounds while breathing. If there are no sounds, then it’s fine, right?”

“...Yes. In truth, I used to discover the symptoms in that way. However, examining the face is more accurate than listening to the lungs. Or are you making light of my experience?”

“Perish the thought. Experience is vital.”

“Then cease your petty griping. It helps nobody. Also, Gondo. Have you not considered a permanent position here? You could be a crew leader. After all, you are quite experienced in that field.”

“Allow me to beg off on that, for I cannot… I will need to leave after this, and I have already accumulated the funds for my travels.”

Gondo had scrimped and saved to the extent that people considered him antisocial, but in truth that was all to purchase the items needed to travel.

“...And where will you be headed now?”

“I intend to delve into the abandoned city, Feoh Raiđō of the south, and go digging there.”

The sinister-looking Dwarf manager’s eyes went wide as he heard this.

“What!... I trust my asking is redundant, but you do know that place is a dangerous region, no? Who will you be travelling with?”

“To the former question: I am abundantly aware of that. To the latter, my answer is no.”

The more people who moved together, the higher the chances of discovery. Once discovered, some or all of them might have to die. Rather than risk that, it would be better to go alone, and lower the chances of being found.

“...Did you leave something behind there?”

“No. I told you, did I not? I plan to go digging.”

“It is the nature of that digging which baffles me. Can you not do enough digging here?”

“Hmph! It matters not how hard I work here… well, there are subsidies for the amount that we move, but that is merely a fixed sum. The truth is, working here simply does not pay enough.”

“It pays better than regular work.”

The Dwarf before him was right. Gondo had chosen to work here because he needed to raise funds in a short period of time.

“Not enough for my aims. That is why I intend to go digging around in the abandoned city. None may gainsay my claim, no matter what kind of metal I excavate.”

The manager knitted his brows into a mass.

Gondo’s words might have been quite extreme, but he was also correct.

“You seek the white iron, then?”

“Yes, exactly. After all, nobody will quibble with me if I recover it from there.”

The fundamental fact was that all these mines were nationalized. Thus, one would have to pay an appropriate — appropriately high — price if they wanted white iron. However, anything one dug out of an abandoned mine was essentially finders keepers. However, if anything happened to them there, the country would not provide any assistance, of course.

"...Would you sell it to me? I'll pay well, of course."

They had not yet dug up white iron from the mineral veins near this city. Thus, once the ores ran out, the price of the metal would rise asymptotically.

However, Gondo knew that the Dwarf before him was not making that proposal out of self-interest. He was doing so purely out of the kindness of his heart.

He probably intended to negotiate with Gondo with a higher price than what a middleman would charge. However, Gondo was not digging the white iron up to sell it — in other words, he was not prospecting for profit.

"How shall I say this… I have already decided what to use it for. It will all be going to my research."

A shadow fell across the sinister-looking Dwarf's face.

"Are you still saying that sort of thing… Well, I cannot say I do not understand how you feel, but should you not face reality and settle down here as a crew leader? What would your father think?"

In that moment, anger blazed up in Gondo's heart. However, he lowered his face to hide the rage twisting it before it could show. After all, the Dwarf before him had helped Gondo's father many times before. That was why he was so concerned about Gondo, his son, immersing himself in research that could not possibly bear fruit.

While the other man had said what he had out of goodwill, Gondo could not bring himself to accept those words.

"I face reality every day. Father did not walk a false path. I will revive the arts that were lost!"

In the end, he could not hold back his wrath completely. As he vented the dregs of his rancor with those words, Gondo turned and strode away without looking back.

He felt guilty about making people worry for him, but it was overruled by the passion he felt for what he had to do, no matter the cost.

Yes.

That was what he lived for, as someone who could not be compared to his outstanding father.

Gondo bit his lip, and looked forward.

1章 未知なる地への備え

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

CHAPTER 1

PREPARING FOR AN UNKNOWN LAND

Part 1

After returning from the Empire, Ainz sat at his desk in E-Rantel and leaned heavily against the back of his chair.

While he had already begun recruiting for the newly-founded Adventurer's Guild of the Sorcerous Kingdom, it would take quite some time before the results could be seen. Until then, he would have to amply prepare himself.

His top priority was setting up a school to train the adventurers, but if circumstances permitted, he could use the Adventurer's Guild itself. It would probably be a sign of hospitality to prepare a hostel for the volunteers who had travelled a long distance to seek him out. Their instructors would be those adventurers who had chosen to remain within the Sorcerous Kingdom.

I should probably ask Albedo and the others about how to manage the territories… but before that… why did he bring up the matter of vassalage… it'll be troublesome for Albedo and Demiurge, right?…?

Ainz had no idea what Jircniv was thinking. Neither did he know how to explain the situation to those two sagacious individuals. Why had Jircniv made a proposal like that? For all he knew, Demiurge might have been working behind the scenes here.

I should have discussed all this with Demiurge beforehand. Ah, but he went to a faraway place, and now all I can do is think of how to take care of it between Albedo and myself… as I thought, it's impossible, huh…

Haaa, he sighed internally. His unease and confusion made his nonexistent stomach ache. And then, when he thought about what would happen when they returned, the pain intensified.

Ainz shook his head, and then considered the information he had learned in the Empire as a way to avoid thinking about what loomed ahead of him.

"...Runes, huh."

Bits and pieces of knowledge from YGGDRASIL were scattered throughout this mysterious new world, like stars glittering in the night. He had found traces of other players, the existence of World-Class Items, and so on.

He could now add the existence of runes — a form of writing from Suzuki Satoru's world — to that list.

The reason why the people of the Theocracy could summon angels from the religions of Suzuki Satoru's world was probably due to magic originating from YGGDRASIL.

Then, what about these runes? How had they come to exist in this world? Were the runes in this world the same as those in Suzuki Satoru's world? Or were they simply a form of magical writing which happened to resemble them, and thus the term had been automatically translated as "runes"?

...The Dwarven Kingdom is located in the nearby Azellisia Mountain Range. I'll need to investigate it thoroughly. As I thought… I can't avoid going there, can I?

Naturally, Ainz had asked Fluder about runes before returning to E-Rantel.

However, all he knew was that the King who hailed from the Azellisian Dwarven nation had once visited the Empire, that he was a runesmith, and that the Empire purchased weapons and armor from the Dwarven Kingdom. However, about a hundred years ago, all traces of rune-carved magic items were lost.

While this was very valuable information to Ainz, it was not what he truly wanted to know.

There was no runesmith job class in YGGDRASIL. If that's a profession which is unique to this world, then there's a chance that the technology of both worlds might be combined into one. Therefore, I'll need to investigate this matter in greater detail. However, who should I send there?

All he wanted was to visit the Dwarven Kingdom and ask about runes and the like. As for the profession of runesmith — well, it *was* a technical matter and a potential state secret. In the worst case scenario, he could make them talk by using charm spells and the like if they were very tight-lipped about it.

If it was simply a matter of using charm or domination magic, or kidnapping people with teleportation magic, then just about anyone would do. But what if there was a player behind these runes? For all he knew, the person who had brainwashed Shalltear was hiding there.

I want to learn more before going in, but it won't be easy to find out about something that even Fluder doesn't know.

Ainz slowly rose from his seat.

In an instant, the woman beside him sprang into action. She had an energetic look on her face that matched the boyish cut of her hair. She was Decrement, Ainz's duty maid for the day.

Ainz reached out a hand to halt Decrement, and then began to pace slowly around in his office.

As Ainz logically considered the potential profit and loss of this endeavour, old memories sprang unbidden to mind in the gaps between numbers. He recalled the dangers he had encountered in unexplored regions, the joy of discovering new things, the sorrow of failing a quest, and the expressions and words of the comrades with whom he had shared these experiences. They were merely memories, but even his recollections of party wipes were transmuted into a brilliant radiance that lit Ainz's empty skull.

After he slowly filed away these painful reminiscences away into his heart, Ainz's thoughts finally took shape.

...I guess I'll have to go in, even though I know there might be danger.

The guild called Ainz Ooal Gown was an organization which had been founded on those principles.

Naturally, some people might scoff at the idea of comparing games — which held no danger to their players — to reality. Still, hesitation could cost one the chance to gain new knowledge, and result in one losing the initiative. Who could say it was not possible?

After he decided to investigate the runes of the Dwarven Kingdom, a question appeared in Ainz's mind.

That would be the choice of personnel.

Who would be the best candidate to send there?

Should I ask the opinion of Demiurge and Albedo? No, if I do that, I won't be able to send out the most capable fighter of all.

That person was Ainz himself.

Ainz could say without any false pride that there was nobody in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick who was better at him at adapting to unknown phenomena and magic. Simply put, the most efficient course of action was for Ainz to proceed by himself. However, if there really was an enemy player there, it would also be the most foolish move he could make.

...If there's only a few of us, I can at least take them with me when I flee. That means I should pick people who can buy me time while I prepare to make our escape.

The first people to appear in his mind were the Floor Guardians.

As level 100 NPCs, they would be able to buy time for Ainz to escape, even against other players. That said, could he really use the NPCs, the beloved children of his former friends, in such a way?

What if I used high-level vassals led by an undead lieutenant? No, their flexibility is too low, compared to the NPCs who were built from scratch.

Vassals had the merit of being much more easily disposable, as opposed to the NPCs. But at the same time, their abilities lacked breadth and thus their lack of adaptability was a weakness.

When he excluded the emotional side of the issue from his considerations, the NPCs were the ideal choice. Ainz the player had not conducted experiments to that effect, and thus he could not be sure if he could be resurrected. However, there was no doubt that the NPCs could be resurrected, as he had done with Shalltear.

Ainz sat down in his chair once again.

“Hmm…”

Ainz steepled his fingers in front of his face, and mulled over the best choice to make.

But in the end, he still could not reach a conclusion.

Could it be that idiots can’t find the answer no matter how much they think?

With a self-deprecating smile, Ainz looked over to Decrement.

“Would you be willing to die for me?”

“Of course, Ainz-sama. You have but to give the order and I will throw my life away for you,” Decrement responded, without a moment’s hesitation.

“Do the others think the same way? Would they think I was a cruel master?”

“I believe everyone else would gladly accept death without a second thought. Nobody would even think of refusing. We were made by the Supreme Beings, and thus we exist only for the Supreme Beings. There is no greater joy for us than to carry out any command they give us.”

“Really now… Also, I was merely asking out of curiosity. There was no deeper meaning to my question. Put it out of mind.”

As Decrement bowed, Ainz made up his mind.

—He would use the NPCs.

Ainz pulled out a map of the surrounding area.

This map was compiled from the findings of Aura's explorations. In particular, Ainz was sure that there was no other map which covered the interior of the Great Forest of Tob in more detail. Sadly, he could not be sure of the accuracy of the scale, and so he could not conclude that it was a perfect map. However, with this in hand, it was much less likely that he would get lost.

Ainz placed a finger on E-Rantel, and then slowly traced a line north, passing through the Great Forest. There was no problem up to this point. Most of the Forest was now under Nazarick's control. After eliminating the monsters and beasts with low intelligence, they took control of several demihuman and heteromorph settlements and that was the end of it. There was a large cave underground, but he had no intention of messing with it for the time being. Of course, he could take control of it if doing so was profitable to him.

His finger reached the gourd-shaped lake at the northern tip of the forest.

Further north of there was the Azellisia Mountain Range. It was uncharted territory.

"An unknown region, huh…"

Hmph, Ainz smiled.

He had just impressed upon adventurers the importance of exploring the unknown. Practicing what he preached would make for good publicity.

"Come search for the Dwarven Kingdom of the Azellisian Mountain Range."

It sounded like a slogan one would hear on television shows.

He waved away the smile that came naturally, and began his contemplation in earnest.

He considered the advantages that would come from personally going to a place where there might be other players.

Obviously, having the Sorcerer King show up in person was a clear sign of his sincerity.

It was like a company's boss personally going to another firm to conduct negotiations. The effects of that were immediately evident, in Suzuki Satoru's experience.

In addition, his perspective was unlike his subordinates, who tended to view those outside of Nazarick as inferior lifeforms. Ainz qualified as a moderate among the members of Nazarick. As a result, he felt that he was not a bad choice for negotiating with the Dwarven Kingdom — or a non-courageous choice, if he was being honest with himself.

In addition, he could always send Pandora's Actor over.

He was the ideal choice, be it in terms of intelligence, adaptability or other areas.

However—

Who will administer this country in the meantime?

Somebody else had to answer that question.

That person was naturally Ainz Ooal Gown.

I can't do it.

Ainz screamed internally, over and over again.

If he had to pick between the two, he would rather go to the Dwarven Kingdom.

More to the point, all he needed to do was to visit once and he would be able to teleport there in the future. If any problems came up, all he had to do was to play his trump card of "I shall consider this in greater detail back home". Even if the other party countered with “We hope you will decide on the spot”, he could just throw another excuse together on the fly.

Ainz knew many techniques to escape a situation like that.

I had Ainzach around last time, but now I’ll be playing the role of the door-to-door salesman for my wares. It’s not like I need to clinch a sale either, so it should be easy.

Ainz smiled as he took on the expression of Suzuki Satoru the salesman. Then, the context of his smile changed.

Plus… as time goes by, I might be able to hand over the vassalization of the Empire to Demiurge and Albedo, and let them draw up the plans for it. Yes! It can’t be helped. It’s not like I want to flee from my work or anything!

As he fervently made excuses for his behavior, Ainz began thinking about the next problem:

Who would he take with him?

Ainz folded his arms with a puzzled look on his face.

While he would like nothing more than to have Albedo or Demiurge around, they had more important things to do and they were also project leaders. If he brought either of them along, then problems would crop up in their affairs.

Aura and Mare were very good choices, especially because they were humanoids like the Dwarves. Thus, their counterparts would not be too wary of them.

Cocytus would be tricky. Granted, he was a good pick for visiting a cold and mountainous region, but he was now in charge of the Great Forest of Tob, which also made him a project leader of sorts. Ainz hoped that he could focus his energies on that task. In addition, his unusual appearance — combined with that of Ainz — would probably make the other party unnecessarily nervous.

Sebas was a good choice too.

He was currently providing administrative support in E-Rantel, with Tsuareninya as his assistant. It should be fine to bring him out with Pandora's Actor around, but Ainz had some doubts about.his fighting ability.

Gargantua and Victim were out of the question, of course. The images of several other NPCs loomed up in Ainz's mind, but most of them were not suitable to follow Ainz around as bodyguards.

If that's the case, then it'll have to be — Aura and Shalltear.

Aura — and the monsters she commanded— could be considered an ideal choice for the role of a tank. In the worst-case scenario, he could sacrifice her beasts and escape with Aura. And then there was Shalltear, the best one-on-one fighter. She could serve as a trump card against a strong foe. In addition, there was another reason why he wanted to use Shalltear.

He should have brought Mare along instead, considering that he might be facing an army. However, if they encountered a player, their priority would be to retreat and not exterminating the enemy. Thus, he would leave Mare behind this time around.

"If that's the case..."

Just as Ainz was about to make a move, the sound of a [Message] rang within his head.

『Ainz-sama.』

"Oh, it's Entoma."

『Yes. I am currently travelling with Shalltear-sama and we have reached the village of the Lizardmen. Cocytus-sama wishes to send over a Lizardman with a report concerning the village's status and seeks your permission to open a [Gate]. What should be done, Ainz-sama?』

Cocytus would occasionally send over reports on the village which he was tasked to run.

Ainz did not really know how well Cocytus had done, so typically he would give these reports a quick once-over and reply with a "Good job." There were times that he wanted to say, "You don't have to do this anymore", but reporting to one's superiors was the proper attitude to have, and in turn, he had to fulfil his responsibilities as Cocytus' superior.

"Then open the [Gate] at the usual place… ah, no, the defensive spell should still be active. Wait an hour before…"

Ainz took out a schedule sheet and made sure of the time.

"Cast the spell at 13:46. I will lower the defenses for about two minutes at that time."

While this building was not Nazarick, it was still shrouded in magical fields which impeded teleportation and the like, powered by the MP of high-level vassals. These fields were strong enough to impede fairly high-tier spells, but they drained the vassals to the point where he had to rotate them out several times a day. In addition, they also impeded friendly teleportation.

This was because of the friendly fire effect, which did not exist in YGGDRASIL.

Thus, there were occasions when he needed to briefly disable the defense grid to permit direct teleportation to this place. Of course, lowering the defenses meant that enemies could teleport in as well. In order to keep them from being hit by an "explosion" — as they called it in YGGDRASIL — Ainz decided to limit these brief openings to predetermined periods.

『Understood. I shall relay your message to Shalltear-sama.』

Ainz replied, "Good" before cutting off the [Message] and rising to his feet.

"...I'll leave the choice of my clothing to you. A Lizardman is coming as an emissary of Cocytus. Pick something which won't embarrass me."

"Yes, sir!"

A fire blazed in Decrement's eyes.

Her too? Ainz thought, but he did not give voice to those words. A man with no confidence in his sense of style could not say such things.

With Decrement in tow, Ainz walked while giving orders to an undead being he had created on the fly. Said orders were to inform the undead guarding the great hall of this manor about the arrival of a Lizardman via [Gate].

As he watched it disappear into the distance, Ainz contemplated the effective use of the undead which he had created.

If Ainz's undead could report to him, then he could place them all over the world and create an undead intelligence network. Unfortunately, that would be very difficult to accomplish. Even if Ainz gave a command, the undead could only give vague responses. In addition, it was very hard for Ainz to manage the massive increase in the number of undead which he had created. There was always the risk that he might slip up and give an order to a completely unrelated undead minion by accident.

In the future, he might be able to set up some sort of system to address this problem, but that was impossible given the present circumstances.

Perhaps I could let Pandora's Actor handle that sort of thing in my place. But then I'd have to deal with the problem of all the undead he made freezing up when he's not in my form.

He would have to consider the matter in earnest after seeking the opinions of Albedo and Demiurge. While pondering this problem, Ainz reached his changing room.

As usual, the two lines of maids greeted him with eyes aglitter. In particular, Decrement's eyes — as Ainz's duty maid — were practically bloodshot.

Ainz permitted the maids to help him change while asking about Aura's location.

Today, he would wear something in pure white.

It seemed too flashy for someone like Ainz, who was used to wearing dark browns.

On top of that, the maids adorned him with a gigantic necklace made of gold and other metals. It made him worry that the magpies would try to steal it on account of its shininess.

But the part of the outfit that made the least sense was the feathers which protruded from his back.

Am I a peacock or something? Ainz wanted to say, but when he glanced around, he saw a shared look of pride and satisfaction on all the maids' faces. None of them looked worried, or had any expressions that could be considered anywhere close to negative. All of them had the same look of nervous awe on their faces, their cheeks tinged pink.

They were like a bunch of fangirls standing before a beloved idol.

Is this really all right? Is this really so attractive to ladies? ...Looks like I have no fashion sense, after all.

As Ainz waxed melancholy within his soul, the maids finished dressing him up.

From the mirror, he noticed that there were feathers sprouting from under his arm, which made Ainz think of a monster from YGGDRASIL.

Was it an Archaeopteryx or something… I think they were pet dinosaurs for druids.

They ruffled when he folded his arms in front of himself, which was quite annoying.

But what would they say if he told them, "this outfit won't do"? They would reply with something along the lines of "How is this unsuitable? Please tell us what clothes we should pick in future."

"Alright!"

In the end, Ainz decided to cast these bothersome things aside.

"Let's go!"

◆ ◆ ◆

When the appointed time came, Ainz felt a magical portal — a [Gate] — open in the great hall.

While he had already dispelled the magical field surrounding this building, the person passing through the [Gate] did not appear right away, thanks to the [Delay Teleportation] spell he had cast. This was the same spell he had used during the battle with Shalltear.

[Delay Teleportation] briefly hindered teleportation effects that had their destination near the caster, buying them several seconds of time, which the caster would typically use to flee or prepare an attack. In addition, the spell also informed the caster of how many beings would be teleporting into their vicinity.

Thus, Ainz knew that only one person had teleported here.

Entoma might not have come here with Shalltear, but she would probably be arriving soon.

[Delay Teleportation] only delayed a teleport. It could not cancel it entirely. Thus, some time later, a black half-sphere appeared within the area of the [Delay Teleportation] spell.

Shortly after that, a Lizardman fearfully poked its head out from within.

As he — it should have been a he, right? — looked around, his line of sight met that of Ainz, who was seated upon the simple throne in the middle of the great hall.

"Your, Your Majesty, Ainz Ooal Gown. Forgive your servant's rudeness before you."

Ainz could not fully conceal his consternation at the Lizardman's fluent speech. While Zaryusu was a cut above the rest of his tribe, this Lizardman's diction sounded polished and natural.

Is this the result of Cocytus' training?

The question percolated in his mind, but there was something to do before that.

Ainz's [Delay Teleportation] spell had already told him that only one person would be coming. Once he was sure that nobody else was coming, he ordered a Death Knight standing by on the sidelines to reactivate its magic item. The Death Knight nodded in acknowledgement and strode forth, and then Ainz turned his gaze to the kneeling Lizardman.

At the same time, Decrement — who stood at Ainz's side — chimed in with expert timing.

"Lizardman, you are granted an audience."

This was completely different from how she had been when picking out clothes for Ainz.

She radiated the air of an icy princess.

Under normal circumstances, most people would be upset at a maid in a palace (or a similar location) taking this tone with them. The supplicant might well smirk as he noted that the ruler doing so was accompanied by just a single maid. Alternately, he might pity the Sorcerous Kingdom for having so little manpower that a maid had to perform such duties.

However, these Lizardmen were trained by Cocytus, and they fully understood that any of the NPCs was vastly superior to them. Therefore, they did not question Decrement's attitude.

Ah, what a pain. Why can't you dispense with this nonsense and speak plainly? Well, that's what I think, but as the saying goes, when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Ainz Ooal Gown was briefly troubled by the remnants of the spirit which belonged to Suzuki Satoru the salaryman, but that could not be helped.

The Lizardman rose to his feet, unaware of Ainz's inner turmoil. In truth, Ainz could not tell the difference between one Lizardman and another. If their scales were a different color, or if they had obvious distinguishing features — brands or an abnormally large arm, for instance — it might have been possible, but he could not tell how the Lizardman before him differed from any other.

In any case, Ainz had Decrement command the Lizardman to identify himself.

“Ainz-sama graciously permits you to state your name.”

“Understood! I thank you for your magnanimity! Your servant is Kyuku Zuzu, former chieftain of the Razor Tail tribe!”

Ainz had never heard that name before.

Should he openly display his ignorance, or pretend that he knew? Ainz chose neither of these, but picked a third option — in other words, he nodded to continue the flow of the conversation. After all, Cocytus might have mentioned this during a previous report.

Following that, Ainz ordered Decrement to have the Lizardman tell him why he had come here.

What a pain!

This was basically how things went whenever he met with a subordinate— his servants.

If I wasn't worried about people looking down on the Sorcerous Kingdom, I would have suggested doing away with this bothersome business...

Just as Ainz sighed internally, Decrement gave the Lizardman a command.

“In his mercy, Ainz-sama permits you to state the reason for seeking an audience with him.”

“Understood! Cocytus-sama, the ruler of our villages and the master of the lake, wishes to present something to His Majesty the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal

Gown, Supreme Overlord and ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, as well as the liege of Cocytus-sama."

Ainz was surprised by how many titles the Lizardman had managed to string together, but he did not show it on his face. Instead, he inclined his head toward Decrement, who stepped forward and received a scroll from the Lizardman. Then, Ainz had to wait for Decrement to return and present it to him before he could finally read it.

It was covered in Cocytus' script. There were so many numbers recorded within that it would take quite a while to read through it here.

Therefore, Ainz rolled the scroll back up and gave it to a Death Knight who was standing nearby. Only then could he finally address the Lizardman directly.

"Well done."

"Thank you!"

While that was all Ainz could say, he did not intend to end the conversation there.

Ainz rose from his throne, and spoke to the Lizardman.

"Now then, I will ask you a question, not in my capacity as the Sorcerer King, but as the master of Cocytus. After all, they say speaking to one's vassals directly will deepen their mutual understanding."

The Lizardman looked vaguely confused. This was because he had no idea how to handle being directly questioned. At least, that was what he thought was going on, despite the difficulty of reading a Lizardman's face.

"Be at ease. This is not a formal interview. Once you leave this place, no trace of the events here will linger in anyone's thoughts or memories. Neither will I censure you for any lack of respect in your behavior."

These words were addressed to Decrement and the surrounding Death Knights, as much as they were directed to the Lizardman before him.

“Now then, how is Zaryusu? I understand he has remained within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick as of late?”

“Indeed! By Your Majesty’s grace, he is in good condition. He is the father of a healthy child, and his relationship with his wife is similarly excellent.”

“Oh, is that so! I permitted him to return because his child was about to be born, and now it has. I see, I see. Well, it is good that the happy couple is getting along.”

There were married people within the guild Ainz Ooal Gown. Ainz could not help but remember them. “My wife’s feeling kind of grouchy” became a magic word that allowed anyone to disconnect in the middle of a game, and no one would be able to find fault with them for that.

Smiling from the memories of the past — although his expression did not change — Ainz continued asking questions.

“Was the child white as well?”

Zaryusu’s wife was the white Lizardman. Being that she was a very rare breed of Lizardman, she aroused the collector’s spirit within Ainz, and left a deep impression on him.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is as Your Majesty has surmised. While the child will assuredly be a superior individual regardless of whose bloodline it inherits, it would seem it has tended toward its mother’s ancestry, being that its scales are snow white.”

“Oh, so there’s only—”

Ainz closed his mouth before he could blurt out “one hatchling”. Referring to them as people would probably be more prudent. While none of them would actually express displeasure at his choice of words, that did not mean Ainz could casually make mistakes. If his poorly chosen words led to problems in Cocytus’ rule, Ainz would not know where to begin apologizing.

“—Only one child, then?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Just one.”

“Oh… I see. Only one child, then.”

It would seem they differed from reptiles, who had big clutches. Still, as long as the couple had a good relationship, they might well have more children in the future.

Ainz felt the collector’s blood stir within him. He kind of wanted to know if he could have one of them to play with, but forcefully separating a child from its parents was a poor thing to do.

However, he had heard that the Lizardmen had a tradition of branding themselves before travelling on long journeys. If Zaryusu’s child chose that path, then he might be able to train them up as an adventurer.

The Adventurer’s Guild Ainz envisioned was an organization made up of many species. If he could get a rarely-seen Lizardman in there, it might end up being good for publicity, like an idol enrolling in a school.

“How are the mother and child? Are they being fed well?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Many thanks for your kind concern. The mother and child are in good health, and the child looks like it will grow to be exceptionally lively.”

“Really now, is that so. This is certainly cause for celebration. Then, to commemorate the birth of a child with a glorious future ahead of him, permit me to present a gift. However, I am not fully apprised of the intricacies of birth-gifts within Lizardman culture. Share your opinion with me, then; what would be a good present?”

It would be terribly boring to give fish or something in place of a birthday cake. He would rather give them something more tangible and permanent.

“I understand. While my tribe does not have the practice of giving gifts to celebrate births… I feel that Zaryusu would be delighted to receive arms and armor.”

"Wargear, then… umu."

If possible, he would have liked to give something which would please his wife as well, but since armor would protect her husband's life, one could say that it would indirectly make her happy.

Just then, Kyuku fearfully spoke up.

"—May your servant venture a question, Your Majesty?"

"What is it?"

"Why is Zaryusu worthy of such high praise?"

The fact was that Ainz had no intention of praising Zaryusu. He merely thought of him as the husband of a rare white Lizardman. Still, he could not actually say that, so he racked his brains for an excuse to give.

"...He is an outstanding man. In truth, I hear that his training in Nazarick has shown admirable results. As such, I shall reward loyalty and excellence with matching largesse."

"I am eternally grateful for your kind words, Your Majesty. We shall strive to show greater loyalty and devotion in the future."

"Mm. Hold on to that determination of yours."

After nodding in a magnanimous manner, Ainz considered if there was anything else he wanted to ask. A truly excellent ruler would probably want to hear about the status of the Lizardmen's villages and compare it to Cocytus' reports, and as such he would immediately have more in-depth questions to ask. However, Ainz could not do that.

Just as Ainz was about to dismiss him, something came to mind.

"This may not concern your village, but what do you know about the Dwarves of the Azellisia Mountain Range?"

The village of the Lizardmen was located at the base of the Azellisia Mountain Range.

“Your Majesty, I have heard about them before.”

Ainz had not expected an answer to his casually-posed question. Ainz ordered the Lizardman to tell him about the Dwarves as he rejoiced within his heart.

“With the greatest respect, your servant submits that the following was merely overheard from an acquaintance. The Dwarves are a species which builds cities in productive mines, and they use the ores thus extracted to manufacture all manner of wargear. Among those are weapons and armor made of very rare metals.”

“Very rare metals, you say?”

For a moment, Ainz thought that he had gulped in surprise.

Those words were extremely tempting to a player that loved collecting rare items.

“Do you know what these metals are called?”

“Regretfully, your servant does not, Your Majesty. My understanding does not reach that far.”

Disappointment set in for Ainz, and he chided himself for his foolish expectations.

While adventuring as Momon, he had learned about metals, but there had been no news about anything harder than adamantite. In this world, even orichalcum and adamantite qualified as ultra-rare metals. It was hard to imagine the exotic metals which the Lizardman had described being anything more than that.

Even so, Ainz could not suppress the swelling anticipation within him.

If they were a race that lived within the earth, would they have access to metals which were rare even by Ainz’s standards?

If… yes, if. What if this world possesses the prismatic ores of YGGDRASIL, and the Dwarves are mining them? Granted, that assumes that there are prismatic ores in this world, but if that was really the case, could it be possible to have them produce a [Caloric Stone] — one of the hidden items of YGGDRASIL?

The [Caloric Stone] was a World-Class Item. It could only be obtained by gathering vast quantities of the prismatic ores and then expending a certain amount of them. Usually, that would entail an extremely difficult process, but Ainz Ooal Gown had accomplished it once.

They had found a hitherto undiscovered mine for Celestial Uranium, one of the seven prismatic ores, and a critical element for the [Caloric Stone].

Under normal circumstances, a guild which found a new mine would thoroughly exploit it before selling its ores on the market. That was because tapped-out mines in YGGDRASIL would slowly recover and be ready for further harvesting. Ainz Ooal Gown had planned to do just that.

That said, the reason why they had managed to attain that World-Class item was entirely due to an extraordinary stroke of luck.

At first, they had let the prismatic ores trickle into the market, hoping to drive the price up due to their rarity. And then, the large stockpiles of prismatic ore in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick underwent a spontaneous reaction.

Ainz could still vividly recall the bizarre mood in the air, generated by everyone as they realised almost all the prismatic ores had disappeared, and in their place was an item which had rolled to the ground. *Should we be happy for this,* they wondered as they glanced at each other, a vague look of emptiness on their faces.

After that, they used the [Caloric Stone] when they learned that they could obtain that expendable-type World-Class Item in the same way as before. Then, they tried to produce it again, but sadly, the Celestial Uranium mine was taken from them, and that dream had gone up in smoke.

As Ainz and the others saw the Celestial Uranium being sold at a high price, they were equal parts happy and disgruntled. Given the way it was being handled, there was no way for them to produce a World-Class Item.

A wicked smile appeared on Ainz's face as he basked in his memories, and he mocked them in his heart.

You idiots. The whole point of monopolizing it is to store up the necessary amount. There's no way you could make it if you put the ores up for sale. Unless—

Ainz recalled Punitto Moe's words.

"There should be other sources of Celestial Uranium besides the one which Ainz Ooal Gown (we) discovered. For all we know, they actually have other mines for it, and they took ours in order to keep it hidden from outsiders," he had said.

However, he quickly refuted his own deduction. That was because he learned that the guild in question had used the World-Class Item [οὐροβόρος] to banish Ainz Ooal Gown from that mine. *"Even if they wanted the ability to reliably produce the [Caloric Stone], was it really worth expending one of the World-Class Items known as The Twenty?"* he had wondered.
(TL Note: Ouroboros)

Ainz shook his head, chasing away the memories of the past from his mind. Even so, he could not fully eliminate the idea that had come to mind.

...Even if there's no prismatic ore there, the Dwarves might know about other metals. What if there was knowledge there which had not spread to the outside world? If I used a charm spell or the like — oh, I'm being too hasty. I shouldn't let my imagination run wild. Still, this does involve runes as well. As I thought, this is a top priority and should be addressed immediately.

Just then, Ainz noticed the Lizardman sneaking peeks at him. Apparently he had been lost in a world of his own.

"...It seems I was lost in my contemplation.Tell me, who told you about the Dwarves?"

"Your Majesty, that would be Zenberu, a fellow tribe leader alongside me."

"Hoh! That Zenberu, hm? ...Umu. Are you saying that Frost Pain was also a creation of the Dwarves? Was it a gift Zenberu gave to Zaryusu as a sign of their friendship?"

He had heard about the origins of the sword from Zaryusu. However, it would be wise to ask others about it as well.

"That was an heirloom from days past, and it did not come from Zenberu."

"Is that so…"

It was exactly as he had heard. However, there might be something there which the Lizardmen did not know about.

There are many weapons in this world which could not be made in YGGDRASIL. For example, there's that weapon with the passive ability to cut through defenses...

The magic weapons in this world were made by having a magic caster enchant a weapon produced by a blacksmith. In other words, a skilled magic caster was more important than a skilled blacksmith when it came to making a powerful magic weapon.

However, there were exceptions to that rule. Fluder's could make the stilettos which Clementine carried through his magical knowledge, but the same could not be said for Gazef's sword.

"Perhaps," Fluder had begun by saying, *"Gazef's sword was spontaneously created by the natural absorption of mana, or perhaps through the magic of the Dragons."*

Still, I can't be certain that he was correct. There's many things Fluder himself does not understand. Could the Dwarves make a weapon like that as well? While I know I'm looking forward to this a little too much...

YGGDRASIL's weapons — Guild Weapons and a few others aside — possessed a data capacity that was determined by the value of the materials used in their construction and the skill of their maker. This data capacity limited the number of data crystals which could be added to it. Thus, rarer metals allowed for the creation of a correspondingly more powerful weapon.

The smith was also a key part of the equation. Much like it was in this world, the humanoids called Dwarves in YGGDRASIL had bonuses to craftsman-type classes. Therefore, Dwarves were very popular among those people who wanted to play weaponsmith or armorsmith characters.

That being the case, would they possess weapon-crafting knowledge which Fluder did not?

Does that mean runes are part of it? Mm. Taking control of the Dwarves… Not bad. The Head Librarian and Demiurge are conducting experiments with scrolls. Nfirea is working on potions. Fluder is handling magic items. Then I shall let the dwarves take charge of weapons manufacture.

All sorts of experiments to strengthen Nazarick were taking place concurrently. Ainz smiled in satisfaction as he thought about them. And then, he realised that if the Six Great Gods really were players, then Ainz might well be 600 years behind them.

We may need to spend the next few years, no, the next few decades on technological development. We can't be careless here.

For all he knew, others may have noticed those things which even he had picked up on. As a leader, he had to eliminate the baseless notion that he was special or unique.

If someone was thinking along the same lines as me, then there'd be a higher chance of discovering something useful among the Dwarves. Other players might have asked the Dwarves to help develop technologies or commissioned weapons from them, and in the process they would have learned about their application of runes. ...Should I get Albedo and Demiurge's opinion on this, and ready our forces for a full-scale operation?

An hour ago, he was still thinking about visiting the Dwarven Kingdom with just himself and Aura for company. However, given that the Dwarven

Kingdom had just gone up in priority, the plan for that excursion had to be remade.

He had to learn about the Dwarven Kingdom and ensure that his spy could gather information in a clandestine manner. At the same time, avoiding magical surveillance was very important.

The problem now was how long all this would take.

If the player who brainwashed Shalltear was hiding there, it would be extremely dangerous to give the opposition too much time. If he took a passive stance, the enemy might well pick the most opportune moment to launch an attack. In order to avoid this, they had to take the initiative and make the first move.

…So this will be a gamble, after all. An ambassadorial party, hm. We will establish diplomatic relations with the Dwarven Kingdom. If a player launches an attack, it will be a casus belli *for us to mount an invasion in turn. We can then dig out the necessary information from the debris.*

Ainz enumerated the things he had to do after meeting the Dwarves.

One: verify the presence or absence of players.

Two: investigate the runes and their origins.

Three: Obtain information and samples of their metallurgy and ores.

Something like that.

However, they would hardly tell all of that to Ainz up front. It was only natural to conceal one’s technological prowess. Information was more valuable the more hidden it was.

If there were YGGDRASIL players who let their knowledge leak out all over the place, Punitto Moe would surely give them a vicious tongue-lashing.

...Also, what if I could get them to export weapons to the Sorcerous Kingdom so our adventurers could acquire them at a lower price? Pretty attractive, no? But

in order for that to take place, I'll have to be on good terms with the Dwarves. While I could always take them as slaves within Nazarick, that will be a last resort. I'd like to make my words to Ainzach that much more convincing.

Still, all this was ultimately nothing but a conjecture.

"...Lizardman. Does Zenberu know about the Dwarven city?"

"Yes. He told me that he had lived in the Dwarven city for some time."

"Is that so. Do you think Zenberu would take me there?"

The Lizardman fell into thought, and then tilted his head.

"My deepest apologies, but your servant cannot answer that question. Of course, I am certain that if Your Majesty orders something, Zenberu will strive eagerly to fulfil it. However, it has been several winters since he returned from the Dwarven City, so I am not sure how much he still remembers…"

"Really now… Well, if that's the case, I can deal with it using magic. It'll be fine."

[Control Amnesia] might well be able to clear things up.

After praying that Ainzach or Fluder knew something about this, Ainz permitted the Lizardman to leave.

Part 2

Two hours after meeting the Lizardman, Ainz sighed quietly within his room.

That was because he had just finished communicating with Fluder and Ainzach via [Message].

Why do I have to teleport over there in person to prove my identity? Especially Fluder. I thought he'd be used to it by now, but I guess I was wrong.

When he used [Message], neither of them believed that he was Ainz, so he had no choice but to [Teleport] to where they were and speak to them in person.

The way in which they apologized for the inconvenience in the same way and asked Ainz to only use [Message] in times of emergency made him feel like they had planned it out beforehand.

Ainzach aside, you'd think Fluder wouldn't want to waste time on other matters, considering the book which I gave him.

Of course, Ainz was wise enough to remain silent.

Speaking of which, while he had heard of the tragedies caused by the use of [Message] in the past, it was hard for him to understand why they could not put their faith in the spell until now. That said, it probably was not something they could accept so easily. In addition, it *would* be quite damaging if they, as his collaborators, were deceived in such a way. In that case, all he could do was suck it up and accept that the MP cost of teleportation magic as a necessary expense.

His dejection was also related to the results of his conversations with the two of them. The use of teleportation would have been worthwhile if it had yielded good information. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Ainzach knew that there was a Dwarven Kingdom in the Azellisia Mountain Range, but he was not sure of its location. The Kingdom had not attempted to forge any national-level ties with the Dwarves either. Even if they had, those would probably be limited to small deals within the mining city of Re-

Brumelashul. Ties like these would be closely linked to the city's profits, in any case, and so it would be hard to try and cut in on them.
(TL Note: リ.ブルムラシユール)

Fluder felt the same way too.

Although he had heard of Dwarven culture and their government, the fact was that he knew next to nothing about them. There was something about how a powerful Dragon had caused great damage to a Dwarven city, but he had no clue about the name of the city, or the name and abilities of the Dragon.

It would seem Fluder had not investigated the matter because it did not interest him. However, they could probably begin researching it through Imperial channels after this. At least, that was what Fluder suggested, but Ainz shot that suggestion down. It would take too much time, and having an exposed traitor like himself perform said research might lead to trouble.

In the end, the only person he could count on was Zenberu the Lizardman.

It's about time I sent a [Message] to those two and told them about the Dwarves.

"I'll contact Shalltear first. Hm… the right person for the job?"

That was high praise and cruel criticism at the same time.

Ainz closed his eyes — though he had no eyeballs — and thought about the matter for a few minutes. Then, he opened his eyes and cast the [Message] spell.

"—Shalltear Bloodfallen."

『Is, is that you, Ainz-sama? Where do you need a [Gate] opened at this time?』

Shalltear was the strongest of the Floor Guardians, and the only one to administer multiple floors. The fact that the first thing she asked was where to open a [Gate] was terribly sad. At the same time, Ainz felt a little guilty about assigning that task to her.

“No. This time, I shall entrust a weighty duty to you.”

『A, a weighty duty?』

“Umu. You shall accompany me on my travels, and ensure my safety.”

The silence lasted several seconds.

Don’t tell me she didn’t hear that. What’s going on? Just as Ainz began to wonder if something was wrong, Shalltear’s voice — off-key, probably from over-excitement — rang through his head.

『Your servant shall fulfil this task, even if she must grind herself to dust in the process!!!』

“U-umu. Then I shall explain in greater detail. Come to my quarters in E-Rantel.”

If he did not specify that, it was quite likely that she would teleport to Ainz’s room in Nazarick. However, that had only happened once. He had sent a [Message] to Narberal telling her to come to his room, and after waiting and waiting for ages she had not arrived. It was only after he sent another [Message] to her that he discovered she had been waiting at his room in Nazarick.

Ainz reflected on it, and realized that the fault lay with the order which he had given. Thus, he resolved never to make that mistake again.

『Understood! Your servant shall come immediately!!!』

“Also, give Mare your task of maintaining surveillance on the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. Inform him of whatever he needs to know when you hand your duties over to him. Considering the time needed for that… Come over when you’ve settled your affairs over there. I don’t have any appointments which will take me away from my chambers, so I will wait until you arrive.”

〖Yes!! I, Shalltear Bloodfallen, shall carry out your orders faithfully and without delay!!〗

“The handing and taking over of duties is very important. Don’t rush and make a mess of it just because I’m waiting, got that? I shall order Mare to proceed to your room, the Adipocere Chamber.”

〖Understood!! Then I shall commit the tasks which I will be handing over onto paper!!〗

“Also, I trust I don’t need to say this, but you are to give your ring to Mare.”

〖Of course!! I understand that it will only be in his safekeeping for a while!!〗

It was very dangerous to bring that ring outside of Nazarick. On the other hand, as long as it and the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown were not taken, there would be enough time for all the Guardians to gather. Therefore, the rings were hidden within the piles of gold within the Treasury, apart from the one which Ainz wore and the ones issued to certain people within Nazarick.

The reason why Ainz wore the ring despite knowing the danger was because it would be impossible to enter Nazarick if nobody wore it and the enemy had blockaded the entrance to Nazarick.

“Very well. Begin your preparations, then.”

〖Yes!! Then, is there anything I should bring to your room, Ainz-sama?〗

“A reasonable question, but there is nothing you need to bring. I will explain my plan to you when the time comes, and then I will give you time to ready yourself.”

〖Understood!!〗

Shalltear’s passionate response vanished as the spell terminated.

Then, he sent Mare a [Message]. There was little difference in the contents of their conversation, save that he told him to take Shalltear's place as the protector of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

After hearing Mare's still, small yet clear voice, Ainz ended the [Message].

Finally, Ainz sent Aura a [Message].

"Aura, it's me."

〖Yes, Ainz-sama! What do you need me to do?〗

"Umu. I would like you to accompany me to the Dwarven Kingdom."

〖Understood!〗

"First, I hope you will meet me in my chambers at E-Rantel while we wait for Shalltear"

〖*Shalltear?!*〗

The ensuing cry of disbelief made Ainz grateful that he did not need eardrums to hear.

"Aura, lower your voice."

〖I, I'm very sorry, Ainz-sama!〗

Like I said, lower your voice... Ainz thought that, but did not say it.

〖Ah, are we going to destroy the Dwarven Kingdom?〗

"No. How did you reach that dangerous misunderstanding? I just want to conduct some friendly negotiations."

〖Ah, I see! So you've already foreseen that peaceful negotiations will break down, then?〗

“Aura, your—”

〚Ainz-sama, I’m here!〛

“What? You mean you’ve already arrived at my room?”

〚Yes, exactly!〛

A knock came from the door just as she said this.

Ainz smiled bitterly as he watched Decrement go to answer it.

“Ainz-sama, Aura-sama requests your permission to enter.”

Ainz gestured his approval, and Decrement took one step away from the door.

〚”Sorry to disturb you, Ainz-sama!”〛

Aura’s voice overlapped with that of the [Message] spell as the Dark Elf girl greeted him.

“All right, then. Have a seat and we’ll talk.”

Ainz indicated a pair of sofas which faced each other, and then turned to Decrement.

“Prepare refreshments for Aura.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama. We have apple juice, orange juice, lemon squash, tea and coffee on hand at the moment.”

Decrement placed the apple juice which Aura requested on the small table between the two sofas. As Aura began sipping at it, Ainz began his explanation.

“First, let me explain myself about your question concerning the destruction of the Dwarven Kingdom. Bringing Shalltear along does fulfil a requirement for combat power, but there is another reason for that.”

“Eh?!”

Aura’s eyes went wide. Given her attitude, it was clear that she considered Shalltear to have very limited uses. Still — Ainz found it hard to hold back the warmth surging within his chest.

It reminded him of Bukubukuchagama and Peroroncino’s relationship.

Every now and then, Bukubukuchagama would ask, “Has my stupid little brother given you any trouble?”

When people replied with an, “Uh, I don’t think so?” she would immediately respond like Aura had, with a “Seriously?!”

It was hard for Ainz to contain himself as he realized that Aura and Shalltear were carrying on that same relationship. The memories fell like powdery snow, filling his heart with bliss. His joy welled up, and just as he was about to laugh — the emotion was suppressed.

“...Shit.”

Ainz quietly cursed as his moment of happiness was ruined by his emotional suppression. It had helped him out many times in the past, but he found it tiresome when it got in his way. Ainz knew he was being selfish and hypocritical, but he still found it hard to accept this interruption of the memories of his former friends.

“Ah, er… Ainz-sama? What’s wrong?”

However, his displeasure vanished like smoke in the wind as he heard the girl’s tremulous voice. He could not allow himself to express these negative emotions in a way which even a child could see. Ainz took a deep breath, and smiled to Aura.

“No, my apologies. It’s nothing. As I was saying earlier, I’m bringing Shalltear along this time around to investigate her adaptability. She was created to be the strongest Guardian. At that time, if she had fought properly, even I might not have been able to beat her.”

"Well, if it's for something like that—"

"—No, it's not like that. If I were Shalltear, I would have summoned my Einherjar right away and then prepared for battle while it engaged my enemy, then attacked with magic as my MP permitted, followed by the use of my skills. Then, I would have triggered my Blood Frenzy in some way and then charged into melee with the Spuit Lance while my attack power was increased."

Ainz smiled, a little uncomfortable.

"If that had happened, I would have run away without a second thought."

His skill as a player aside, Ainz's character could only be considered to be in the upper portion of the middle tier of all players. Shalltear's character build and equipment placed her in the lower portion of the top tier. If she was fully equipped — with divine-class items — she would be in the middle portion of the top tier. If she could change her gear to match her opponent, she might even be able to fight evenly with the upper echelons of the top tier.

"However, her reputation as the strongest Guardian has instead hampered Shalltear's growth."

"Eh?"

"The most effective use for Shalltear is to deplete the enemy's resources, so she has to be launched out like an arrow. Once she is deployed, she has to be left to run amok through the enemy lines. However — is that really the right thing to do? It might be the best way to fully utilize Shalltear's strength, but can we really say that it's the most suitable method to use?"

"I don't quite understand… but if you feel that it's right, then it should be correct, Ainz-sama."

That sort of answer really makes it hard to keep the conversation going. What Ainz truly wanted to hear right now was a carefully reasoned reply about the pros and cons of Ainz's statement, which was what a proper adult would have said. Still, children were expected to be frank, after all.

“Is, is that so. However, I don’t think that is the case. When I said that it was the best way, it was only in terms of fully utilizing her strengths. However, it might not be the best way once Shalltear starts accumulating experience.”

Ainz was making progress as a warrior. No, it would be best to say that he had learned to make full use of all his abilities. While his body might not be able to improve, other parts of him were still growing.

Unlike how they had been when they were merely data, the NPCs now had minds and the capacity for independent thought. The same applied to Shalltear. The Shalltear of tomorrow would be different from the Shalltear of today.

“Having her do different things instead of repeating the same old tasks might help her grow… Of course, she might fail, although I do not wish for that. Still, even if she does mess up, all we need to do is to have someone beside her to pick up the slack. That is precisely why I asked for you, Aura.”

Aura had a better relationship with Shalltear than Mare. Ainz had selected the elder sister of the twins because she could keep Shalltear in line.

Having listened attentively to all of this, Aura forcefully nodded in acknowledgement.

“...Still, while I said that I want her to accumulate various experiences, that might violate the social contract, and it would cause problems for the company — for the group.”

“Eh? What does that mean?”

“...Think of it this way. It would not be good to force Shalltear to do things she does not want to do.”

“Obeying you is what we should do, Ainz-sama!”

“...Don’t you think it would be wrong to make her do something that goes against Peroroncino-san’s wishes? If my orders conflicted with Bukubukuchagama’s desires, how would you feel about obeying them, Aura?”

“Ng! Well, I, ah, I would…”

Aura nervously lowered her head, and muttered something along the lines of, “It’s hard to say.”

“All right, don’t worry about it. It was just a comparison. My reason for picking Shalltear this time around was to challenge her and see if she has grown.”

“I see! That’s Ainz-sama for you, your complex insights run so deep!”

A superior had to let his subordinates experience challenges in order for them to grow.

This was one of the secrets he had gleaned from a book he had read not long after coming to this world.

The reason why he had not given Shalltear an opportunity like this until now was because the situation had been very dangerous, and also because there was no time for such things. Now, however… no, there would be no better chance than this..

“I’ll tell you the rest when Shalltear arrives. That way, I won’t have to explain myself twice.”

Just as Ainz said so, knocking came from the door, followed by Decrement going over to check on the visitor.

“It is Shalltear-sama.”

The person he was waiting for had arrived. Ainz indicated that Decrement should let her in.

As the door opened, he saw someone in the doorway.

“Shalltear Bloodfallen is ready to go!!”

Ainz — who was prepared to thank her for her coming all this way — froze up for a moment, and it took him a while before he could gather his wits and speak.

"Why… why are you in your full battle gear?"

Not only was she in her full plate, but she was even holding her Spuit Lance.

"Yes!!! I am fully prepared to protect you, Ainz-sama!!!! I shall exterminate anyone who dares to oppose you, Ainz-sama!!!!!"

Ainz glanced at the panting Shalltear, her eyes wide open. Then, he glanced to Aura, as if to say, *what should I do about this*? It was not as though he could say Shalltear had gotten the wrong idea.

"Haaa~ you're being too hasty. How about taking action *after* Ainz-sama finishes speaking?"

Shalltear pouted as Aura took a jab at her. Before the two of them could start quarrelling, Ainz raised his hand to get their attention.

"Shalltear. You might have the right idea, but things are different this time. Forgive me for not explaining things to you."

Ainz hurriedly explained the objectives of this operation to Shalltear — and his plans to forge friendly relations with the Dwarven Kingdom.

A baffled look appeared on Shalltear's face after she took it all in.

"If, if that's what you want, is it really alright to bring me along?"

"...I have many reasons for choosing you. Having you protect me is one of them. But the greatest reason is so that you can gain experience. It is my selfish opinion that you consider yourself unsuitable for this task due to your Blood Frenzy. Perhaps after you give it a try, you might discover that you are surprisingly suited for this sort of thing."

Shalltear's eyes went wide.

"I understand, Ainz-sama!! I shall make sure you do not regret your decision!!"

“...Umu. Then, Shalltear, I will be placing you under Aura’s command for this journey. Since Aura is in charge of you, I hope you will obey her.”

“Understood!!”

Shalltear bowed to him.

Ainz wondered if her response was too high-strung, but it was better than a dispirited answer. Still, it would be troublesome if it all turned out to be for nothing.

“I appreciate your eagerness, but you should calm yourself down, Shalltear. ...Then, let us consider the matter of followers. Who else should we bring along?”

“Ainz-sama — may I be allowed to speak?”

Ainz was somewhat startled because the response had come from an unexpected quarter, but he coolly turned to face Decrement.

“What is it? Is something the matter?”

“Ah, I was wondering how you would feel about bringing some of us maids along to serve as your attendants during your trip to the Dwarven Kingdom. Traditionally speaking, those in power have always brought followers with them to handle miscellaneous tasks. I feel that the Dwarven Kingdom will think poorly of you if you do not bring handmaidens with you, Ainz-sama.”

“I see. ...You do have a point there.”

While spying on Jircniv, he noticed that the man went out escorted by several carriages, and some of them contained well-dressed ladies. They must be the people who waited on him. If he had stayed in Nazarick back then, Ainz would have observed him more carefully, but regrettably he had not, which was a bit of a shame.

No, the fact was that Jircniv had come a long way to visit Ainz, and Ainz had been terribly rude to Jircniv by not insisting that he stay the night. Granted, the man had firmly refused every offer of lodging Ainz had made, but perhaps the right thing to do was to make him change his mind.

Perhaps if they had established good relations back then, the matter of vassalage might not have come up at the arena.

Oops, I'm getting off-track… Decrement has a point, but—

Ainz considered her data. The 41 regular maids might look different, but their equipment and statistics were identical.

The heteromorphic species known as Homunculi were not particularly outstanding, and they were very weak, being only level 1. While they were still superior to level 1 human beings in terms of stats, if it came down to a fight, a Homunculus would only have a 60% chance of victory.

The maid uniforms they wore did provide them with a measure of defensive strength, but that was only on the level of a high-class item. Those might seem incredibly resilient to the inhabitants of these world, but they were nothing more than scraps of paper to a YGGDRASIL player.

Frankly speaking, there was no way he could bring them to the Dwarven Kingdom, given that he knew next to nothing about it. There was a chance that a player might be waiting with his forces deployed and ready for battle.

"Still… Unfortunately, I cannot do that. If we must have followers — Shalltear, can I bring your Vampire Brides with us?"

"There is no need to ask. Everyone in Nazarick serves you. You have but to order us."

"Is that so. —Decrement, your proposal is very reasonable. However, it contains a problem, in that you are weak and I am uneasy about your safety when travelling into unknown lands."

"We are all prepared to face any form of danger!"

Ainz raised a hand to calm Decrement down.

“I am pleased by the loyalty which you — which you all show. Therefore, once I ensure that the Dwarven Kingdom is safe, I shall send for you via teleportation. Until then, what do you think about handing the matter to the Vampire Brides?”

Decrement’s mouth moved several times, but no words came out. Eventually, she bowed her head. Ainz hoped that she was not agreeing because he had ordered her to, but that was most likely not the case.

Since he had nothing else to persuade her with, and he would not change his mind no matter what she said, Ainz turned his eyes from Decrement.

Resurrecting level 1 NPCs was cheap, but that was not the problem here.

Nobody would bring their friends’ children into a dangerous place.

“Then, Shalltear, bring — let me see — six Vampire Brides along. Then add 30 more riders on top of that. Five of them will be the recently summoned Hanzos.”

There was no particular significance behind the number 30. It was simply that he felt that number would be sufficient. Perhaps it was because this was the amount of players allowed in a raid group?

“I’ll contact Cocytus while waiting for everyone to gather. Right, I should finish up first. Once everyone is assembled, the two of you will travel to the Lizardman village through Shalltear’s [Gate]. After that, we’ll head north to find the Dwarven Kingdom. What do you think?”

“Understood!”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

The two Guardians replied in the affirmative. They did not suggest a better idea, which Ainz had hoped for. While the two of them were hardly yes-women, the fact that they had said exactly that in response to his suggestion made Ainz feel a little uneasy. This was because Ainz did not have much confidence in his own idea.

“Then, do you have any suggestions on who the other followers should be?”

“My magical beasts—”

“My undead—”

The two of them spoke up at the same time, and then glared at each other. Just as he thought they would start arguing, Shalltear looked away first.

“After you.”

“...What? Did you eat something weird?”

“It’s just that I was ordered to listen to you.”

“...It just feels gross.”

Shalltear’s eyebrow twitched, but she said nothing.

“In that case, how about having 25 of your undead ride my magical beasts?”

“I don’t mind —” Shalltear looked to Ainz “—But that would be more than the number you mentioned, Ainz-sama. Would that be all right?”

“It’s fine.”

“We’ll do that, then.”

Since the two of them seemed to have reached a consensus, Ainz continued speaking.

“Then, let’s get to work on our own accounts. I’ll give you two hours to select your personnel. Keep in mind that you may not be able to return for a while after leaving, and do not think that you can teleport back to Nazarick with teleportation magic. Aura, you need to be particularly careful about this as one of the living. If that’s all, let’s split up. I have a lot of things to discuss with Pandora’s Actor.”

At the same time, he made a mental note to contact Albedo about this with a [Message].

◆ ◆ ◆

“At last, the time has come!”

After she was sufficiently far away from the supreme being’s room that her voice would not reach it, Shalltear clenched her fists and shouted in joy.

“It’s been so long… but at last, I can make up for my past failure and let everyone know that Shalltear Bloodfallen can be of use to everyone!”

Shalltear gazed off into the distance.

Aura was quite aware of the feelings contained within Shalltear’s voice, which was unusual for her. Although Shalltear had already been punished for her mistakes and Ainz-sama had personally told her that it was not her fault, Shalltear still wanted to erase the mistakes she had made. As a fellow Floor Guardian, Aura could understand her feelings very well. Still — she was a little uneasy.

“It’s been a long time coming… All the work I’ve been given until now had been so easy that anyone could do it. However… However…”

“Ah~ I feel that the work Ainz-sama gave you was very important, Shalltear.”

“Well, it is as you say, to some extent. Still, was that work really important?”

“Protecting Nazarick is pretty important, no? After all, being the first line of defense against any invader is a task you’d give to reliable Guardians, right?”

“Nngg!”

Shalltear could not deny that.

Then, she nervously pressed her fingertips together and pulled them apart again.

“Does Ainz-sama really think that way?”

“Mm~ probably. Ainz-sama said that you were very strong, Shalltear.”

Shalltear smiled broadly. That response let Aura sigh in relief. If she had let her go on like that, Shalltear would surely have gone to a lot of trouble for nothing and that would only inconvenience Ainz-sama. If that happened, she had no idea how she would apologize to him for it. In addition, she felt pity for Shalltear.

“But when I was in the human city, Demiurge singled me out. He must have felt I was useless. If that was what Demiurge — the greatest mind of Nazarick — thought about me, then wouldn’t the others, especially Ainz-sama — whose wisdom surpasses that of Demiurge — feel the same way?”

“Hm, you can’t really say that. Perhaps it’s because Ainz-sama is smarter than Demiurge that he felt that way about you.”

In that moment, Shalltear moaned wetly with a “Ho…”

“As expected of Ainz-sama…”

“...Haah.”

Aura was starting to feel a little tired. However, she had the feeling that being direct with Shalltear would not work, so perhaps an indirect method would be effective.

“Still, that means that the others feel the same way as Demiurge.”

“...I can’t deny that.”

Or rather, that was definitely the case. Aura spoke up before the wide-eyed Shalltear could continue.

“Ainz-sama wanted to test your flexibility by exposing you to various situations, so I think encountering difficulty isn’t a bad thing. Until then, if you take notes and learn from around you, you’ll be able to impress Ainz-sama and the others.”

“So I should study up before that?”

“That’s right. Think about it, you’re travelling with the greatest person in all of Nazarick, right? Doesn’t that mean you can learn something from Ainz-sama?”

“I see! ...But, what should I do?”

“Shalltear, that’s where the learning starts.”

“That - that’s right!”

At a loss for words, Aura had simply thrown that question back to her.

That ought to be okay… right?

A flicker of unease passed through Aura’s heart. Still, the ball was in Shalltear’s court now, and there was nothing else she could do.

Will she behave herself...

Aura offered up a prayer to Bukubukuchagama, the Supreme Being who was also her god:

Bukubukuchagama-sama, please watch over Shalltear, who was made by your little brother Peroroncino-sama!

Part 3

Ainz travelled to the Lizardman village through a [Gate].

He was escorted by Hanzos for his protection. Of the five Hanzos, one had a red cloth tied to his right arm.

It was not enchanted in any way; it merely indicated that he was their leader.

At first, he had simply thought that doing so would make it easier to manage them. However, the newly appointed leader was delighted at being chosen, and Ainz could tell that he was smiling under his mask.

Frankly speaking, Ainz felt somewhat guilty. After all, he had merely given him a piece of cloth.

Defended by his vassals, Ainz could now see the statue of himself.

Ainz had already been here several times before, since it was a pre-arranged teleport destination. Still, it deeply embarrassed him.

There were statues of historical figures and so on in Suzuki Satoru's world, but surely anyone would be ashamed to witness a monument to themselves while they were still alive.

What truly disturbed him was the fact that the facial bones were slightly different from his own. It would seem they were trying to beautify him

Do the cheekbones look more handsome when they're like that? I don't get it at all. What kind of aesthetic sense could have produced this?

As Ainz contemplated the matter, he turned and noticed Cocytus and his Lizardmen kneeling before him.

He was used to such genuflection now that he was more experienced in playing the role of a superior being. Still, it did not please Suzuki Satoru the salaryman. That said, he understood that it was a sign of their loyalty, so he did not ask them to stop.

“—Raise your heads.”

After that permission — given with mixed feelings — was granted, the Lizardmen looked back up, as though they had come back to life.

“Thank. You. For. Coming. All. This. Way. Ainz-sama.”

Ainz indicated to the still-kneeling Cocytus that he should rise.

“Umu. Thank you for your hard work. I have received your report on the village. Though I only glanced through it, I did not see any problems, which is good. Your accomplishments here are worthy of praise.”

“Many. Thanks! All. This. Was. Accomplished. By. Your. Glory. Ainz-sama.”

I didn't do anything, Ainz wanted to say. Instead, he accepted Cocytus’ loyal praise with dignified grace. After all, if he had said anything else, it would have devolved into an infinite loop of “Nono,” “Nonono”, “Nononono” and so on. Ainz was quite certain of that.

“...That said, the excellent results you have shown deserve to be rewarded.”

Thinking back, Albedo and Mare had already received a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown each, Aura had received a watch with Bukubukuchagama’s voice recorded into it, Shalltear had been given Peroroncino’s bestiary, and Demiurge — he had given Demiurge that demonic statue made by Urbelt.

His gift to Cocytus was the lives of these Lizardmen, but it was probably time for some other reward.

“Perhaps you might say it is not needed, but it is only natural that rewards and punishment must be handed out as they are deemed necessary. ...Tell me, Cocytus, what do you want?”

“No. Ainz-sama. I. Desire. No. Reward. Other. Than. To. Serve. You. Loyally.”

While Solution’s request for “innocent humans” was quite disturbing, a request like Cocytus’ was also quite hard to grant.

One of his guild members had complained about a certain type of annoying woman, the kind who said, “Anywhere is fine” when you asked “Where do you want to go for lunch”, and then went on to say, “We should have gone to an Italian place after all”. Ainz felt the same way. It was a hundred times easier to get along with someone who plainly stated what they wanted.

“...Cocytus. A lack of desire can sometimes be more troubling than greed. I now command you — tell me what you want within a week’s time, limited to material objects. Do you understand?”

A distressed look appeared on Cocytus’ face. Ainz paid it no heed.

“Do you understand?” he repeated.

“If. That. Is. Your. Will. Ainz-sama.”

“Umu. That *is* my will. Alright, then. Cocytus, it is time to move onto my reason for coming to this village. I wish to speak to Zenberu.”

“Understood! I. Have. Already. Brought. Him. Here. Please. Come. This. Way. Ainz-sama.”

Cocytus moved behind and to the side of Ainz, and then addressed the kneeling Lizardmen.

“Zenberu. Answer. Ainz-sama’s. Questions. You. Are. Permitted. To. Directly. Address. Him.”

Zenberu raised his head with a “Yes”, but there was confusion in his voice.

“Then, I shall get to the point. I wish to visit the Dwarven Kingdom. Thus, I wish to employ you as a guide. Can you take me there?”

The Lizardman looked like he had narrowed his eyes.

He did not understand the expressions of Lizardmen, and he could not tell what kind of look he had on his face, but it did not seem like a good one.

"My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty, but may I ask your intentions for heading to the Dwarven Kingdom?"

As he finished speaking those words, a clacking of mandibles issued from behind Ainz.

"...Zenberu. Seeking. To. Know. The. Intention. Behind. Ainz-sama's. Decisions. Is. The. Height. Of. Disrespect.. All. You. Need. To. Do. Is. Answer. The. Question. Truthfully."

Cocytus was using the same tone he always did, but there was distinct displeasure in his words.

Ainz wanted to shrink away from the clearly unhappy voice coming from behind him.

Still, while Ainz was already like this despite not being the target of Cocytus' aggression, Zenberu remained silent. He watched Ainz's reaction, his gaze unwavering.

Tension filled the air amidst the fearsome silence, which was broken only by the threatening sounds from Cocytus. *Not much time should have passed*, Ainz thought. when he suddenly realised that Cocytus was about to make a move and stepped in to block him. Not doing so would be dangerous.

"It's fine, Cocytus. Zenberu did not show me any disrespect."

"But. Ainz-sama—"

"It is fine. Then, I shall take a small measure of pity on you, Zenberu. What gave rise to the misconception you now hold?"

Zenberu's reaction was only natural considering what he had done to this village. Still, Ainz did not let those thoughts show on his face. If Ainz willed it, then no blame could be attached to the servants of Nazarick for their actions. Acting otherwise in front of his subordinates might make them doubt themselves and affect their future activities.

"Zenberu. I have no intention of harming the Dwarves. I have come in person because I wish to form a friendly relationship with the Dwarves."

"Is that really true?"

"You—"

Ainz turned to Cocytus.

"Cocytus. Your loyalty pleases me. But I have already said that it is fine. Pay no heed to what Zenberu says here and forget it."

"Understood!"

Was this what they meant by "speaking your mind frankly"? If the boss asked you to "speak your mind frankly", it was clearly a trap.

Ainz turned back to Zenberu.

"Indeed, that is so, Zenberu. I will swear it on my name if need be. I wish to forge a friendly relationship with the Dwarves. However, it is also possible that the use of force may be required if it is warranted by their response. Can you understand that such a course of action might be unavoidable?"

"Naturally. It makes perfect sense. In this world, might makes right. Even so, how shall I say this… I do not wish to repay kindness with malice."

Zenberu paused to take a quiet breath. Ainz was reminded of how warriors breathed when they were about to launch an attack.

"In addition, if you launch a surprise attack and extermination after I lead you there, I pray you will forgive me for taking up arms against you."

A quiet grinding came from behind him, and Ainz said, "It's fine" to Cocytus.

Even without checking, he already knew it was the sound of Cocytus tightening his grip on his weapons.

What shall I do with you, Ainz thought as he looked haughtily upon Zenberu. It would seem his repeated practice had paid off, because Zenberu's body froze in terror.

"Well, if that happens, I shall simply have to destroy you as well. Not that I mind… But that is quite brave. Have you considered the fact that your betrayal might end up destroying all the Lizardmen in the village as well?"

"...I trust you would not really do that, Your Majesty?"

As Zenberu stared hard at him, Ainz cupped his chin with his thumb and forefinger. Then, he made an announcement.

"It seems you are mistaken. I consider matters in terms of benefits and liabilities. While I will probably not destroy the entire group for the treachery of one man, if it turns out that similar betrayals might occur in the future, and that the drawbacks outweigh the benefits of leaving them alive, do you not think I will exterminate them all without delay? Or do you think I am a brainless, all-loving being?"

Zenberu's expression changed.

However, Ainz did not know what kind of expression it had changed to.

It seemed odd to be saying this as an undead being himself, but he felt that the Lizardmen were sly.

There was no need to understand the expressions of other races. After all, he was merely an undead being with the memories and experiences of the human being called Suzuki Satoru.

Since Zenberu did not look like he was going to continue speaking, Ainz carried on:

"Ah, don't worry. I will not destroy this village even if you do betray me. After all, it would not be an organized uprising, and your reaction is quite understandable given your personality and history. They are your old friends -- your benefactors? I understand why you would side with them. However, allow me to repeat myself: I will not destroy the Dwarven Kingdom for no reason."

Whether players were present or not, Ainz did not want to launch straight into hostilities without a dialogue.

After all, things were not progressing very well with the neighboring countries.

Now that they had to vassalize the country which they appeared to have had the best relations with, their name would live in infamy if they ended up waging war on the Dwarves as well.

Therefore, they had to do their best to sign a treaty of friendship with the Dwarves. This way, they could show the nearby countries that the Sorcerous Kingdom was an entity which could abide by pacts and agreements. This would also give them the moral high ground and allow them to limit the actions which could be taken by any players hiding out there.

What would players do if they were wary of the Sorcerous Kingdom?

The most likely outcome was that they would deem the Sorcerous Kingdom an evil empire, and use that as a rallying cry to make war on them.

On the flip side, what would they do if they heard that the Sorcerous Kingdom had signed a treaty of friendship with the Dwarven Kingdom, like a proper, decent nation?

Some people might think that it was signed under duress or that it was gunboat diplomacy. However, on the surface it would appear to be a fair and normal treaty.

Hypothetically speaking, if a player decided to wage war on the Sorcerous Kingdom, that player would certainly invite entities on his level — most likely other players — to join him in his crusade. However, some of these people might think of the Sorcerous Kingdom as a decent nation. These war-averse people might cite the Dwarven treaty as a reason to stay out of the conflict.

Granted, this was a presumptuous conjecture, but he might even be able to strike while the foe was in disunity and defeat them, whereupon the bombshell of "That's why I didn't want to fight" would go off and tear the enemy apart.

This was the reason why he wanted to place himself on the moral high ground.

After all, the only thing Ainz feared was a group of players, not just one or two other players.

It was true that players with World-Class Items were fearsome, and so were players with very powerful classes, like World Champion. That said, if they were alone, they would not be able to defeat Nazarick without using one of the Twenty.

"So you can be at ease."

"—I understand that now."

"Umu. That is for the best. Can I entrust that task to you then, Zenberu?"

"I understand, Your Majesty. I will take you to that cave city of the Dwarves where I once briefly resided."

Ainz nodded in satisfaction, and then turned to Zaryusu.

"Good, I will address Zaryusu now. Please accept my felicitations on the birth in the family. Are both mother and child well?"

Zaryusu nervously (?) answered:

"Yes, Your Majesty. They are doing fine. It seems my child is about ready to start walking."

"That's fast!"

That said, his investigations revealed that the human children in this world developed faster than those in Suzuki Satoru's world in all aspects, be it in terms of teething, speaking or walking on their own. Of course, that was merely something he had come up with after comparing his observations to his recollections of what Touch Me had said in the past.

“Is that so? I feel it is quite normal…”

“Ah, I see. I seem to have considered that from a human’s point of view. Children… hm. Currently, I am in the process of building a nation composed of beings from various species working together. If I asked you to live in a nation of humans under my rule for the purpose of advancing that agenda, would you accept?”

“I cannot refuse Your Majesty’s orders.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.”

While Zaryusu might not have intended it to come out that way, it sounded like mockery.

The same thing happened with Ainzach earlier, Ainz mused as he continued speaking.

“I wish to hear your opinion on the matter. Having left the Lizardmen as a Traveler, you should have experience with this sort of thing, am I wrong? In other words, you should be able to think in ways that differ from regular Lizardmen. Because of that, I would like to hear what you think and feel about the ever-changing world that lies ahead of you.”

“I became a Traveler because I felt that things could not go on as they had. I was forced to do so by my circumstances.”

“Even if that was the case, your perspective should have been broadened by seeing the world. If possible, why not substitute yourself with a regular Lizardman and thus evaluate the merits of Lizardmen travelling to a human nation?”

“Yes…”

After thinking briefly, Zaryusu spoke once more.

“Personally speaking, I would not want to travel to a human city. I would feel uneasy about doing so with a wife and child in tow. Even if it was a country ruled by Your Majesty… it would be quite difficult.”

Having to abandon familiar surroundings and travel to a completely different environment was deeply distressing. It was only natural that one would want to preserve the surroundings which they were used to. This was especially true for Zaryusu, who was a man that had to shoulder the burden of a family.

There might be some people who did not want to be protected for their entire lives. But Ainz felt that people who could not accept protection when the circumstances called for it were weak, be they PKs or PKKs.

“I see. Then… Is it possible for the children to become accustomed to that sort of thing?”

“Does that mean you only intend to take the children, Your Majesty?”

Ainz sensed faint criticism within those words.

Zaryusu must have thought that Ainz would forcibly separate the children from their parents.

“Don’t let your imagination run wild. I intend to build a nation where different races can coexist in harmony. The first step of that is to create a place where the children of Lizardmen, humans, Goblins and so on can come together and play happily. That is all. ...Still, I trust that all of you do not intend to live and die in this tiny little world of a lake, but that you plan to step into the world at large?”

The faces of the Lizardmen filled with complicated expressions.

“Do you mean… You want more people to become Travellers?”

“I take it the job of Traveller is not very glamorous among the Lizardmen, am I wrong? I am simply saying that you should broaden your minds. ...I am not quite clear on this, but could it be that you and your wife do not intend to grant your child a wider view of the world?”

A strange look crossed Zaryusu's face.

"That… is hard to say. I would like to have our children live in a village that is safe and does not lack food, but times are different now."

He must have been speaking in his capacity as a parent. This was little different from how Ainz wanted the NPCs to live in happiness. As he mused on that, Ainz began feeling a certain kinship with Zaryusu.

"I understand how you feel. One cannot expect change from those who are set in their ways. The quicker the change, the more the older generation will whine and reject it."

Ainz shrugged while Zaryusu and Zenberu smiled.

"It is as Your Majesty says," Zaryusu replied. "The elders still complain every now and then."

"Doesn't that mean you're one of those old folks then, Zaryusu?"

Zaryusu looked at Zenberu in bafflement, but even Ainz had picked up on it.

"Parents with children, then? —Yes. Exactly."

Ainz looked fondly upon Cocytus, who stood by his side.

"Well, it seems I will have to make this point clear. Cocytus, I shall now give you an order."

"Understood!"

"Even if Zenberu chooses to oppose me, you are forbidden to harm his friends within this village."

"I. Hear. And. Obey. Oh. Supreme. One!"

Ainz nodded in satisfaction to the deeply bowing Cocytus, and then looked back at Zenberu.

"Then, Zenberu. I would like to know everything you know. Tell me where you met the Dwarves, what sort of life you had with them, what sort of gifts please them, and so on. Tell me everything."

"No problem, Your Majesty."

"Such. Rudeness—"

"It's fine, Cocytus. He would lose his head for something like that under official circumstances—"

Ainz looked around.

"However, this is hardly a formal setting. I shall allow this to go unpunished. I believe I am capable of that much."

Ainz chuckled, and Cocytus spoke again, confused.

"Ai-Ainz-sama..."

Ainz reached out to interrupt Cocytus, and then glared coldly at Zenberu. Then, he used a move he had practiced countless times before the mirror.

"However, Zenberu, there is one thing you should not forget. Cocytus will feel guilty because of the shameful tone you take with me."

Zenberu's body shuddered, possibly out of fear.

Are these pre-battle tremors?

"...My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty. Your servant has overstepped himself."

"—It is fine, You should be grateful to Cocytus, the administrator of this village. Because of him, I will not harm it directly… hm, it seems I have said something pointless. Shall we begin discussing the Dwarven Kingdom?"

"Before. That. Will. You. Not. Take. A. Seat. Ainz-sama?"

Ainz was mildly discomforted by Cocytus' suggestion.

Ainz did not feel fatigue, so he did not need to sit down. However, he could not simply ignore a valuable suggestion like that.

"Indeed. Let us do so. Cocytus, don't use something too decadent. Anything I can sit on will be fine."

"Understood! Then. Please. Excuse. Me."

Cocytus went to his hands and knees, prostrating himself on the ground.

The image of Shalltear overlaid itself on Cocytus from Ainz's memory.

"...I think I know what is going on, but it might be best to ask, just in case. What are you doing?"

"I. Heard. That. Shalltear. Once. Did. This. As. Well. Therefore. I. Sought. To. Imitate. Her."

"That was a punishment for her. There is no need for you to do this."

"But. The. Lizardmen. Under. Me. Have. Spoken. Disrespectfully. To. You. Ainz-sama—"

"There is no need to bring up the past. I already said I did not mind. Did you not hear me?"

"That. Is. True. But—"

Haa—

Ainz had tried to talk him around, but Cocytus was proving unexpectedly stubborn. Despite the fact that the undead did not get tired, fatigue filled Ainz's soul. Sensing difficulty all around him, Ainz decided to abandon his resistance and made a pronouncement.

"—Ah, that's enough. Then, I shall be taking a seat, Cocytus."

"Understood!"

His reply was quite forceful.

Sitting down like this in front of others was very — well, to some extent, it was embarrassing.

Still, the others would find it strange if he hesitated here. What he should have done was to adopt the air of an absolute ruler and matter-of-factly sit upon the body of his vassal.

Ainz bent at the waist. In truth, it was very uncomfortable. In truth, it was very uneven. And in truth, it was very cold.

On top of that, Cocytus seemed to be huffing and puffing in excitement, leaking an ever-thickening white mist, so it looked as though someone had sprinkled water on dry ice and the vapors were billowing out from between Ainz's legs. It looked like some cut-rate special effect used to make someone look more impressive, and it made him feel like he was sitting on a bed of nails.

"Does. It. Please. You. Ainz-sama?"

Crap. He could not be honest here.

A bizarrely curious part of him wanted to know what would happen if he did speak his mind, but the thought of Cocytus' reaction was too frightening.

"Mm, it's not bad…"

Will I sound like a pervert if I say that, Ainz frantically thought. However, he could not think of anything else to say.

"Then. May. I. Know. Whether. You. Prefer. Shalltear. Or. Myself?"

"..."

Ainz was struck dumb. How should he answer?

"Eh… Why, why do you want to know?"

"Yes! I. Feel. That. I. Must. Practice. For. When. I. Must. Someday. Bear. My. Master. Upon. My. Back."

"...Eh?!"

What the hell was he talking about?

Was Cocytus of a species which allowed the female to mount them during reproduction? Or was he just a sexual masochist?

Takemikazuchi-san!

No, he should have been more decent than that. He might have loved fighting, but he should have been a good man who rarely gave people trouble.

But why did Cocytus turn out this way? Ainz was shaken to the core, as though he had discovered someone else's secret fetish.

"Is, is that so. That's good."

Although, Ainz did not know whether it was good at all.

"Yes! Then. Dare. I. Ask. What. Your. Answer. Is. Ainz-sama?"

"It's slightly uneven, but not to the extent that I can't sit down. In that sense, Shalltear is slightly better."

"Is. That. So…"

"No! No, I mean, you have your advantages as well. Ah, how shall I put this, cold… yes, this cool sensation would be best on summer days."

Ainz could not help but wonder why he was so desperate to comfort Cocytus.

"I. See! However… Mm."

While silently rejoicing that Cocytus had fallen silent to think, Ainz addressed the Lizardman.

"Th-then! Pay no attention to what is happening over here. Come, Zenberu, tell me."

"Ah, yes."

According to Zenberu, he had climbed up and down slopes and peaks to find the Dwarves, spending a month in a fruitless search. It was only when he was about to give up that he encountered a Dwarf who came out to explore the surface. After that, various things happened, and he earned the Dwarves' trust and was brought to their city.

His appearance had not done him any favors at first, but he had apparently gained their trust after baring his heart to them.

After that, he had learned martial arts in the Dwarven city. He left once he gained enough confidence in himself and returned to the Lizardman village.

The most important thing among all this was whether or not Zenberu could lead Ainz and his party to the Dwarven city.

Zenberu looked a little uncomfortable, but in the end he replied that he could probably do it.

The Dwarven city was underground, in the depths of a cavern, so he should be able to lead him there as long as the mountain's terrain did not change. When he heard this, Ainz was reminded of the underground cities in YGGDRASIL, and he could not help but get excited.

The last thing he asked about was the distance to the Dwarven city.

Zenberu replied that the journey back from the Dwarven Kingdom had taken about a week along the mountain trails. That had brought him to the northernmost tip of the lake.

Given the Lizardmen were not used to walking on land, a week's journey on foot roughly translated to about 100 kilometers.

Unfortunately, they had to rely on Zenberu's memories, so they could not plot the shortest course on a map.

I should be prepared to stray off course repeatedly.

It made him think of his adventures in YGGDRASIL, and Ainz smiled broadly.

"...Is this information useful to you, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. I welcome expeditions in the dark with only a feeble lantern to light the way. That is what they call excitement, no?"

Perhaps they thought Ainz was making a joke, but quiet laughter came from the ranks of the Lizardmen.

Ainz did not intend to correct their mistake. People who did not know YGGDRASIL would find it hard to understand.

"Then, I shall appoint Zenberu as my guide, and we shall prepare to set out according to what he has told me. Aura and Shalltear will arrive soon with their followers in tow, so you should get yourself ready too."

"I hear and obey, Your Majesty."

Ainz nodded graciously to him, and then rose from Cocytus' body.

He paid no heed to the quiet, mournful sound from below him.

2章　ドワーフの国を求めて

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

CHAPTER 2

IN PURSUIT OF THE LAND OF THE DWARVES

Part 1

Shalltear and Aura gathered at the lakeside near the Lizardman village, accompanied by their hand-picked followers.

Under Shalltear were 25 undead beings, each around level 80 or so. Aura had picked out 30 magical beasts. There were six Vampire Brides who were attendants to Shalltear, Aura and Ainz. Then, there were the five Hanzos Ainz had brought with him. After that were five Mammoth-like magical beasts of burden which had been summoned with in-game currency. Said beasts had cargo harnesses on both sides, the kind that was commonly used in YGGDRASIL.

They could be considered the weakest beings in the group, given that they were only level 40 or so. Still, their cargo-carrying capabilities were quite impressive, and their cold and fire resistance meant that they could move easily through frozen tundra or near calderas filled with churning lava. The most important thing was that their appearances belied their incredible mobility and ability to operate for long periods without eating or drinking.

Ainz ordered Cocytus to stand by behind him, and then called Zenberu forward.

“What do you wish of me, Your Majesty?”

Zenberu stepped away from Zaryusu and Crusch — Ainz remembered their names — and came before him. Ainz could not help but look at the little white Lizardman that Crusch was cradling.

Perhaps Crusch sensed Ainz's collector spirit, but she instinctively moved to protect her child.

It's not like I'm going to snatch it away...

Feeling a little depressed, Ainz handed Zenberu three items.

"Take them. This ring eliminates the need to sleep, eat or drink. This ring grants cold resistance. And this necklace grants the ability to use the [Fly] spell. I will teach you how to use it later. It's in case you fall off a cliff."

"Many thanks, Your Majesty."

This was the basic mountaineering gear he used during his YGGDRASIL days. He could swap out his gear in response to any unique area effects he encountered in the Azellisia Mountain Range.

"Sorry about interrupting your preparations. I have done everything I needed to do. You may return."

Zenberu nodded and returned silently.

"Cocytus. It would seem the children are quite curious."

The children did not flee but kept their distance, looking at Ainz and the others with sparkly (?) eyes.

Mm. Would the kids be able to adapt if I brought them to a human city? No, what if I did the opposite and brought human children here? Maybe I could build a campsite nearby, and then bring the Lizardman children there.

Ainz imagined a scene of human, Lizardman and Goblin children playing together. Then he added Aura and Mare, the Dark Elf children. And then he decided to throw in Shalltear as well.

He had put Shalltear in because he saw her making preparations alongside Aura, the undead and the magical beasts. There was no special significance to it.

I like that image. Maybe I should suggest this to Albedo and Demiurge...

“If. They. Displease. You. Shall. I. Order. Them. To. Leave. Immediately?”

“That was not what I meant… Don’t you feel that children might be able to get along, even if they are of different races? Don’t you think human children could walk hand in hand with Lizardman children?”

“I. Am. Unsure. But. If. It. Is. Your. Will. Then. I. Am. Sure. That. They. Will. Join. Their. Hands. Ainz-sama.”

...This has nothing to do with my will or orders or whatnot, it’s just a matter of getting people of different species to work together. I guess I can’t make this suggestion due to my position as King...

Ainz’s ideas would all be interpreted as absolute orders. Thus, to some extent, it was quite frightening.

“...Really now. Then, it’s about time we set off. —Aura, Shalltear! Are you ready?”

The two of them replied almost instantly

“Yes! We’re all set!”

“The same. If you give the command, we can move out at any point, Ainz-sama.”

“Zenberu!”

“No problems here!”

“All right, then let’s go!”

"Ainz-sama. Be. Careful! If. Anything. Happens. I. Can. Mobilize. My. Forces. At. Any. Time."

Cocytus had a point. If there were enemy players around, things might escalate into a full-scale battle, and that would require the use of military force. However—

"—That might happen eventually. However, this is more of a reconnaissance in force. If we encounter anyone strong, we will fall back after gathering sufficient intelligence. If that happens, we will look forward to your accomplishments on the battlefield."

"Understood!"

♦ ♦ ♦

The plan was to head north and climb the mountains, guided by Zenberu's memories.

The mounted undead acting as their vanguard proudly displayed the flag of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

All the intelligent beings who lived near the lake were under Cocytus' banner. Thus, raising the flag meant that they did not need to fear any attacks. Even so, that only applied to intelligent creatures — those that understood the concept of being ruled. It meant nothing to low-intelligence creatures, like beasts, for example. On the contrary, it raised the chances that such creatures would attack them. Still, there were no monsters in this forest which Ainz and his group could not handle.

Shalltear seemed to be looking around for such foolish beings, but she could not find a single monster. In the end, they reached the northernmost end of the lake.

Their eyes followed the course of a small stream that fed the lake, and ahead of them lay the serrated peaks of the Azellisia Mountain Range. Under a clear blue sky and sunny weather, it was quite a majestic sight, and it stirred a faint emotion within Ainz's heart.

Just then, Zenberu closed the distance to Ainz, and made a suggestion.

"Could I be allowed to walk ahead of you? I think looking at the surrounding scenery might help me recall something."

Naturally, there were no objections.

"All right. Go to the head of the column, then. But don't go alone. Take one of my people with you. If anything attacks, use them to cover you and fall back. You are a very valuable member of this expedition."

"My deepest thanks."

After commanding — or rather, asking — the magical beast that he rode, the creature obeyed and began moving. Since Zenberu had no experience in riding, Ainz had put him on one of Aura's magical beasts, which could be controlled by speech rather than technique.

There was a big difference between their speed in the mountains and their speed while travelling along the lakeside.

In other word, they moved very slowly.

At first, they simply followed the stream north, but they slowed down after detouring to avoid a waterfall.

Zenberu tried his best to recall the route he had taken, but it was very difficult to retrace the steps he had taken only once, several years ago, while heading in the opposite direction. In addition, their elevation was still very low, so the tall trees blocked their line of sight.

Even if the shape of the land had not changed, the trees still grew as time passed.

Zenberu continued forward as he struggled to jog his memory.

Most of the group's members did not require rest, but Zenberu — the most important person of all — was among the few exceptions to that. Thus, they had to stop several times to take a break before they continued on in silence.

They caught glimpses of what seemed to be monsters in the distance, but they did not seem to want to approach. Perhaps Ainz's group was too numerous, or perhaps the monster had fed itself already. Ainz thought that capturing an unknown monster to play with might be fun, but he decided to give up on that idea this time round.

Their current objective was to reach the Dwarven Kingdom.

Ainz knew very well that a hunter who chased two rabbits would catch neither.

With a faint twinge of regret, Ainz chose to hurry on their way.

As the group neared the edge of the forest, the trees gradually grew shorter, and the sun began falling behind the mountain.

The blue sky was dyed a madder red, and then it passed into night. The silhouette of the mountains against an endless sea of stars could only be described as majestic. The knowledge that even this magnificent view was but a fraction of this world made Ainz feel like nature itself was bearing down on him.

His sinuses quivered, and he took in the fresh, fragrant air.

Why could he do that — or rather, if he could do this, why could he not tell how food smelled? Ainz pushed those thoughts out of his mind, and instead chose to savor this air, which could not be found in Nazarick or the outskirts of E-Rantel.

In YGGDRASIL, he would not have been able to experience the greatness of nature in this way.

He felt a sense of fulfilment, just like when he had gained new experience while adventuring as Momon, and Ainz's heart filled with satisfaction. In all honesty, they could go back now without ever finding the Dwarven Kingdom and he would not mind at all.

Isn't — isn't this the sort of scenery adventurers should be seeing?

Ainz chuckled, and then spoke to the people behind him.

"Then, we shall camp here for tonight."

After they all replied in the affirmative, Shalltear asked Ainz, "Shall we return to the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick?"

Indeed, the wisest thing to do would be to make a mark here and then teleport them all back to a safe place to spend the night. However, for some reason he did not feel like it. It was not a matter of the merits or demerits of the situation, but a purely emotional issue.

"There's no need for that. We shall set up camp here."

"But Ainz-sama, the thought of making you camp at such a place…"

A quick look around would reveal only bare rock, and the frigid mountain winds — granted, they had no effect on Ainz, who was immune to cold — stole body heat. Anyone without cold resistance or thick woollen clothing would feel as though they were being pricked by needles. This was probably because the wind had blown across heaped piles of snow and brought the cold air down the mountain slopes.

Ainz smiled as his respect for the grandeur of nature grew ever deeper.

In YGGDRASIL, there were guilds that explored and adventured to turn the unknown into the known. They travelled on an endless journey with those feelings in their hearts.

They were weak in guild battles, but threw themselves singlemindedly into the unknown reaches of the world. At that time, he did not understand what they were thinking. However, after encountering a magnificent world like this one, he began to see where they were coming from.

While he had been Momon, he too had entertained the thought of letting go of everything and travelling the world—

"—Ainz-sama?"

The thoughts that had begun floating up in his head were suddenly scattered.

"What is it, Shalltear?"

"F-forgive me for interrupting your contemplation, Ainz-sama."

"Ahh, no, it's fine. I wasn't thinking of anything important."

"Really? All right, then…"

"Then, what's the matter? Ah, you're talking about camping here, right?"

"Yes. Please accept my sincerest apologies for not preparing a suitable tent despite knowing that you might wish to stay here, Ainz-sama. I wish to retrieve one from Nazarick. Might I be allowed to use [Gate]?"

"There's no need for that. It wasn't that you forgot the tent, but rather, I didn't write it down on the list because it wasn't required. Did you know that Mare can make a shelter with magic?"

Shalltear nodded.

I see. Then, you should know that I can do so as well. I could use a magic item like the Green Secret House instead, but that might be a bit too cramped for our numbers. Now, watch this."

Ainz looked for a suitable location. It could be slanted, but the important thing was that it had to be open and free of rocks.

He found one almost immediately, and then Ainz cast his spell. It was a 10th-tier spell.

“[Create Fortress]!”

As the spell took effect, a mighty tower appeared where there had been nothing before. It was a tower which stood over 30 meters tall, standing erect and proud like it was going to swallow up the starry sky.

Its massive double doors looked strong enough to shrug off battering rams. The walls were studded with countless spikes to keep anyone from climbing them. Four demonic statues adorned the corners of the uppermost level of the tower. They felt weighty and oppressive even at a glance.

This sturdy fortress-like fortification was the physical incarnation of the word: “towering”.

“Then, let’s go.”

As Ainz approached the door at the head of his group, the iron doors swung open. He waited there for everyone else to enter. In YGGDRASIL, anyone on the same team could open those doors with a touch. On the contrary, everyone else could only gain entry by destroying the door. He wondered how the door in this world would make that judgement.

Ainz left two of the undead outside, and then ordered them to open the door after it shut. The doors remained closed.

He waited a bit longer, but there was no sign that the doors would be opening.

“...Could it be that only I can open them? Aura, go touch the doors.”

With a “Sure!” Aura touched the doors experimentally, but they did not seem like they wanted to open.

It would seem only Ainz could open those doors. He mentally furrowed his brows. *Friendly fire was a pain in the ass*… If other players existed in this world, small changes like this might end up affecting others, and in the worst-case scenario he might end up killing someone by accident.

It's been nearly a year now… And I still have to be careful about using my power. It would be a tragedy if someone got caught in our area-of-effect attacks. Should I point it out to the higher-ranking people? Mare, especially… although they might resent me for nagging them about it if they've already realised it… I guess I'll try and pass it off as an off-hand remark or something.

Subtly reminding people was unexpectedly difficult. It was completely different from just going up and scolding them. Ainz had become thoroughly acquainted with that fact during his time in the working world.

As his heart grew heavy, Ainz decided to terminate his experiment and open the gate to let the two undead outside come in. He closed the gates once more after ensuring that everyone was through, and then moved forward.

A pair of double doors faced the entrance, and a passage stretched on beyond them. At the end of the passage was yet another set of double doors. The way was lit by magical lights, so there were no problems travelling along it.

The instant he opened the inner doors, a blinding light shone upon them.

Before them was a round hall. The floor was as white as snow and the ceiling was high above. A spiral staircase coiled up from the center of the room and connected to the upper levels.

"Then… we shall spend the night here. Anyone who needs to rest can do so. Anyone who does not… well, standing here isn't very good either. Everyone, stand by in your rooms."

Ainz indicated ten doors with his pointing hand. Incidentally, space here was expanded, so this place was larger on the inside than the outside.

"There are more rooms like these on the second and third floors, so go ahead and use them. Aura, Shalltear, Zenberu, the three of you stay behind. I want to plot our future route given what we have learned today. Ah, yes, let's gather on the couch over there. Then, carry on, everyone."

"Ainz-sama, what shall we do with the Vampire Brides?"

"Umu…"

Ainz could not answer Aura’s question right away. After all, bringing them along had been Decrement’s idea, and he could have done perfectly fine without them. Ainz paused briefly to think before saying, “I’ll give them orders later. For now, have them wait in their rooms.”

Thus he handed the problem off to his future self.

Then, Ainz headed to the sofa and sat down. Shortly afterwards, the three people he mentioned earlier sat down as well, he began speaking.

“Then, let’s start by recording our travels for the day. Aura, please.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama.”

Aura flipped open a memo pad, holding it open with one hand and sketching a map on it with another.

“I’m not too confident on some of the smaller details, but it should roughly be like this.”

“Umu. Thank you, Aura.”

It was a fairly crude map, but they could verify distances and the like from the air.

“Now then, I know you’re tired, Zenberu, but I would like to request your cooperation. You might not like this.”

“...What do you mean, Your Majesty?”

Ainz smiled to the somewhat nervous Zenberu.

“In other words, I wish to look through your memories.”

“W-what does that mean?”

“...I think I came off like a villain when I said that. I can control others’ memories with magic, but that same magic can browse through the memories of others. Frankly speaking, it drains a lot of mana and I'd rather not use it if I could avoid it, but relying on your clouded memories alone is somewhat worrisome."

"I, I trust it will not have any side effects?"

"It'll be fine. Thanks to the assistance of a certain cleric, I can safely say that I'm quite the veteran at this. There won't be any problems as long as I don't do any weird things in there. In fact, I've performed the same procedure on one of my maids and there were no problems either."

"You mean Shizu, right?"

"Exactly, Aura. That said, the spell isn't all-powerful. If the person himself has almost forgotten an event, I can only get rough details. There are also other things which complicate the spell's use. For instance, the memories might not reside within the brain, but accessed from a more primordial source—" Ainz shrugged as he realized he had gone off topic. "Well, something like that. In any case, I'd like to investigate your memories."

"I see… Just in case, I would like to ask again, but is it really going to be alright?"

"I understand your concerns. Do not worry, Zenberu. I will not alter your memories. I swear that on my name."

"Then — what should I do?"

"Umu. Sit there, and relax. This won't hurt a bit. However, I need to verify some details with you before I cast the spell. Things like, how many months and years ago and where these memories took place, and so on."

After hearing Zenberu's explanations, Ainz cast the spell.

Having cast this spell many times before, Ainz had an expert's confidence in his handling of the magic, but still, using it was extremely difficult.

Since any changes to the memories remained forever, mishandling them might lead to an irrecoverable situation. It was like trying to reprogram a computer without making any backups of the data. One could say it was an excellent spell for making vegetables.

More importantly, the spell expended a vast amount of mana while it was in effect. That was what made it hard to use.

Ainz felt his mana draining away in torrents after briefly browsing Zenberu's memories.

Ainz's original plan was to find the targeted memories and then browse around at his leisure. However, he estimated that his MP would run dry before that. In addition, the problem with this spell was that even if he wanted to wait until the next day for his mana to recover before casting the spell again, he would still have to start from the beginning.

As a result, other spells were more effective at gathering information.

After grumbling in his heart, he saw what looked like a mountain. Just as he found the place he was looking for, his mana ran out.

Examining memories of the past are the most tiring. It's much easier to view recent memories…

As he had expected, the memories he found were blurred, as though shrouded in mist. He saw the faces of Dwarves, but they all looked the same to him. He did not know if that was Zenberu's fault, but he could not tell them apart. All of them were simply beards who bellowed in crude tones and swilled beer.

This is no good. I used that cleric as a test subject and it worked well on Shizu. But I feel like I still can't use it well enough… I can't afford to make mistakes with delicate things like memories. I wanted to continue experimenting with that cleric, but he can't even speak coherently any more… Well, rewriting memories works if I limit myself to the recent few years. I guess I should conduct an experiment on what'll happen if I wipe a person's memories clean...

Maybe I should select a few people sentenced to death from E-Rantel and use them for experiments…

With that thought in mind, Ainz ended the spell.

“How are you, Zenberu? Do you feel unwell?”

“Eh? I feel fine, but weird…”

Ainz smiled.

“I merely looked through your memories. It would be strange if that felt weird to you, given that I made no changes. That is probably a placebo effect of some sort; it should fade soon.”

Zenberu shook his head forcefully. Ainz paid him no heed, but turned his attention to the map.

Even after looking at Zenberu’s memories, he still did not quite get it.

There were no distinguishing features there, and how could he confirm his position in the confusing scenery of the mountains? In addition, the memories of hiding from monsters had been far more vivid in comparison.

The fact was that even if his mana recovered by tomorrow, he would not gain information which was worth that massive expenditure of magical power.

“Then, we shall stick to the plan and have Zenberu lead us north. I didn’t see anything helpful in his memories anyway.”

It was not as though he had any better ideas.

Dispatching outriders would only serve the purpose of massacring the monsters ahead of them.

“Dismissed. Everyone, rest… well, it looks like nobody needs to rest besides Zenberu. Well then, prepare yourselves for tomorrow.”

♦ ♦ ♦

As she watched her master return to his room, Aura turned to Shalltear, who was seated beside her.

“There are rooms to the left and the right of Ainz-sama’s own room. Which do you want?”

Aura had a magic item which allowed her to go without sleep, and Shalltear was undead. Strictly speaking, neither of them needed a room. However, it would be rude not to use the rooms provided for them, and it would be bad for security if they were too far away from him.

“Hm~ well, I’d think either side would be fine, don’t you think?”

“Well, I guess that’s right… Say, what are you doing?”

Aura looked over to Shalltear after hearing her distracted response. This was when she realized Shalltear was writing something in a memo pad.

“Hm, Ainz-sama said that, check. I’m taking notes, of course. I don’t want to forget Ainz-sama’s words.”

“Hmmm~ that’s pretty hardworking of you. Lemme see.”

Aura paused to peek, and saw that the memo pad was covered in densely-packed script, with hardly any blank space left in between the letters.

After a quick glance, she discovered that Shalltear had essentially recorded her master’s words down in exacting detail, as well as the actions he took.

This… how shall I say this? Of course, it makes sense to preserve Ainz-sama’s words for posterity, but I doubt Shalltear is writing them down for that purpose...

Shalltear should have recorded the key points of her master’s wisdom, and then learned from them. However, this situation was beginning to make her feel uneasy.

"Ah, you know. I feel that taking notes is a good idea, but that shouldn't be the whole point, right?"

Shalltear looked at her with a baffled expression on her face.

"Got it? Maybe taking notes makes you think that you've done a good job. But what you should be doing is recording the important things and using them to teach yourself how to deal with similar situations, right? Is it really okay to take notes like this?"

"It seems okay…"

"Well, if that's the case, then great. Just in case, you should go over them again once you return to your room. Try to think about what Ainz-sama had in mind and then put yourself in his place and imagine what you would do in his shoes."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

After saying that, Aura suddenly wondered why she was saying that sort of thing to Shalltear. And then, for some reason, she felt that guiding her in that way was very natural to her.

Haaa. For some reason, I feel like I have a useless little sister… It might be a little disrespectful, but I wonder if Bukubukuchagama-sama felt the same way?

♦ ♦ ♦

They prepared to set out on a particularly brilliant morning. That said, their preparations were nothing more than walking out of the magically-created tower and forming up in a column. Ainz felt that this was much less enjoyable compared to his travel preparations from his time as Momon.

After that, they continued their search, but their efforts from dawn to dusk yielded no fruit.

As the sun sank below the slopes of the mountains, Ainz narrowed his eyes.

They had travelled more than 100 kilometers on the backs of their magical beasts — in other words, they had exceeded the distance to the Dwarf city which Ainz had estimated. Yet, they found nothing. In other words, they would have to begin the time-consuming task of combing the countryside.

Ainz used magic to create a resting place as before, and then, it was time for the next day — in other words, the third day.

Suddenly, Zenberu exclaimed in a strange voice.

“Over here! I remember this place!”

There were no more trees in sight, only a field of rocks. Zenberu’s voice echoed exceptionally loudly in this place.

“Your Majesty! We should be very close!”

“Is that so! Then, everyone, proceed with caution!”

In accordance with Ainz’s orders, the group formed up into a neatly-ordered column.

“Then, I’ll leave this to you, Zenberu.”

“You can count on me!”

The group advanced, led by Zenberu.

Finally, they saw something which looked less like a cave than a crack in the mountain.

Ainz had seen something similar in Zenberu’s memories, but he felt that it should have been bigger. Still, this was probably the right place, given Zenberu’s overjoyed reaction.

The memories were Zenberu’s own; the Lizardman’s perspective ought to be more reliable than Ainz’s fragmentary glimpses.

Ainz smoothed out his mussed-up robe, and gestured to Aura.

Acting as they had planned earlier, Aura led her beast towards the fissure.

"Kingdom of the Dwarves! His Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown, King of the newly-founded Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown to the south, has come to pay you a visit! Will you not send someone to receive him?!"

The voice of Aura the herald echoed through the fissure.

Yet, there was no response.

Aura looked at Ainz with an expression that said, *"What should I do now?"*

Ainz indicated that she should announce them again.

And so, Aura shouted at the top of her voice once more.

However, there was still no response. There was no sign of anyone appearing even after waiting a while.

Zenberu had said that there should be guards watching this exit in order to prevent intruders from the outside. If this was the case, someone should have heard Aura's voice.

Were they avoiding the Dark Elf?

Ainz recalled Aura for the time being, and then summoned Zenberu.

"It's your turn now. Go shout a bit and see how it goes."

Ainz cast several buff spells on Zenberu. While it did not guarantee his safety by any means, it greatly reduced the danger he might face compared to being sent out without those spells.

Zenberu drew near the cave and shouted. Still, there was no response.

"...Hanzos."

“Presenting ourselves to the Master.”

The ninjas poured out of Shalltear’s shadow. The other Hanzos were arranged behind the Hanzo Leader.

“Infiltrate the interior and verify the situation. Do not be spotted.”

“It shall be done. May I ask how far we should investigate? The Dwarven city is said to be riddled with mining tunnels. Fully investigating the intricate web of those tunnels will take a long time.”

“Perform a cursory inspection. Focus on the central region and the administrative areas of the city. You may investigate the tunnel interiors later.”

“Understood.”

The Hanzos took off in a sprint, following their Leader. The way in which they ran, leaving afterimages behind them, was a motion unique to high-level ninja-type monsters.

Ainz indicated that Zenberu should return to the center of the group — allowing him to wait in a safe space. He could be very useful when negotiating with the Dwarves.

“—Shalltear, don’t slack off on security.”

“Understood!”

After using a skill, Shalltear was fully armed and armored in an instant. She surveyed her surroundings carefully, not letting a single detail escape her.

Now that Shalltear — the strongest Guardian of Nazarick — was ready for battle, no opponent, however strong they might be, could instantly kill her with a single combo. That said, experience was the important thing when fighting players, and giving that task to the inexperienced Shalltear was quite dangerous.

In other words, the experienced Ainz might still need to act as a role model for her.

Ainz carefully watched his surroundings as well. Soon, the Hanzos returned. They had taken longer than expected, probably because they had travelled a long way.

The Hanzos lined up before Ainz and fell to one knee. Naturally, their leader spoke for them.

"—Ainz-sama, we have discovered what might be a Dwarven residential area. We searched it, but found no signs of life."

"—What happened?"

"We did not investigate thoroughly, but there were no corpses or any sign of household products within the houses. Neither were there any signs of battle."

"It would seem the Dwarves abandoned this city of their own will, for some reason."

He glanced at Zenberu, who seemed very shocked as well. He might only have known him for a short time, but he had gained a bit of insight into Zenberu's personality, and this did not seem like an act.

"—All right, then. Lead us to the residential district."

"Yes!"

Ainz followed behind the Hanzos. This was unknown territory and he could not be careless here. Shalltear, Aura and Zenberu were also escorted by high-level undead and magical beasts.

The only ones left outside were the low-level Vampire Brides and the Mammoth-like magical beasts.

This was done to set a trap. Any unknown beings who saw them as enemies would surely start whittling down their fighting strength from the part of their forces which they were confident in beating. In addition, it was basic tactics to begin attacking their supply lines in the hope of learning something from the objects which they dropped.

Thus, he did not leave them there alone. He had also positioned a Hanzo nearby, in concealment.

That Hanzo was not there to rescue them.

Rather, it was there to observe the enemy and learn about their attackers. After that, being able to learn their fallback point — or better yet, their home base — would be an unexpected bonus.

The reason why they had not returned to Nazarick at any point during their journey was also to prevent the opposition from knowing that they could replenish their forces infinitely using the [Gate] spell. This would make them think that Ainz and company could be worn down over time.

Well, even if the enemy does appear, it would be good if the Vampire Brides were safe.

Ainz did not want the Vampire Brides to die. However, he did not mind sacrificing respawning POP monsters to gain information on the enemy.

Was this being a little cruel, Ainz thought as he entered the cave.

There was no light from the outside in the cave, and soon they were immersed in complete darkness. However, it posed no problems to Ainz, who had darkvision. Shalltear, Aura, the other undead and the magical beasts also possessed that ability. At their level, mere darkness was not a disadvantage to anyone present.

Zenberu, on the other hand, was being cradled like a princess by one of the undead.

Given the fact that all the stalactites and stalagmites in the area had been cleared away, and the fact that the area was flattened and easy to walk through, there was no doubt that this place was a Dwarven city.

The Hanzos led them onwards. There were many forking paths along the way, all of which led quickly to dead ends, according to the Hanzos guiding them. They had probably been dug to confuse intruders and buy time, or perhaps to help mount a counterattack.

There were spells which Ainz could use under these circumstances, but the Hanzos lacked such abilities. It only made sense that they had taken a long time considering they had to investigate all these possible paths.

As he thought about that, one of the Hanzos turned to face him.

“Ainz-sama, we are about to reach the residential district.”

“Really now. ...There’s some kind of blurred lighting in the distance, Hanzo. Didn’t you say there were no Dwarves here?”

“Yes, there are none. This light is being emitted by a crystalline mineral.”

A vast open space sprawled ahead of them.

As he looked for the source of the illumination, he saw multiple sturdy pillars supporting the ceiling. Crystal-like objects grew from the ceiling, and they radiated the light which the Hanzos had spoken of.

There were no other sources of light — no man-made ones, at least — as far as Ainz could see.

This place seemed like a residential district, as the Hanzos had described it. It certainly looked like a city, with long rows of dull buildings, roughly two stories tall.

Perhaps it was because their builders were a short race, but their structures were all shorter than human-constructed buildings. Even so, they were still taller than Ainz, and he could not tell the size of the city on account of his line of sight being obstructed by the buildings. However, the sheer number of buildings here made him feel that counting them all was an exercise in futility.

“Hmm…”

As Ainz surveyed the city, the flame of hope in his heart went out with a "chu~", as if extinguished by a basin of cold water.
(TL Note: the chu~ refers to a rakugo called お七の十)

It was too run-down.

The stories he had heard of the Dwarven city conjured up a mental image of a shining, intricate and dignified place, but there was no sign of that here. There was no trace of YGGDRASIL — of a player's presence — here either.

Ainz stepped forward, and pushed open the door to one of the buildings.

As the Hanzos had said, he was greeted by an empty space.

He could not see any furniture from where he stood at the entrance. The only things that remained were shelves which had been installed into the walls and other things which could not be moved. White dust covered the ground. It would seem nobody had been in here for quite some time.

"—Zenberu! Call out and see if there's anyone there!"

After hearing Ainz's order, Zenberu shouted the name of the Dwarf who had taken care of him in the past.

The fact that there was no echo within this confined space clearly demonstrated the sheer size of the cavern.

Zenberu shouted several more times, but as before, there were no signs of anybody emerging in response.

"—Hanzos. Search the tunnels outside this city for anything that might serve as a clue. Find the reason why this city was abandoned. However, given that we know nothing about the extent of the tunnel network, return if you feel you have gone too far."

"Understood!"

While it might have been faster to have everyone head out on their own and search, Ainz was not nearly stupid enough to split the party under these circumstances where he did not know what was going on. He ordered everyone to gather and conduct a little investigation. As Ainz waited behind, they opened the doors of one building after another.

All of them were the same as the first.

Some of them contained abandoned furniture, but that was more of a bookshelf here and a table there. He had not found a residence with a complete set of furniture.

Checking all the houses like this would take a lot of time.

“Aura, you have the best senses of all of us. Have you found any clues?”

“Nope. Can’t feel anyone around.”

“Is that so… Then we’ll split up into two teams to search further. Shalltear, take command of the undead and act as our lookouts. Aura, go ahead to the house where Zenberu stayed the last time he was here. Search the city for the reason why the Dwarves are no longer around, but take care not to stray too far.”

The two Guardians replied in the affirmative, and then he saw Zenberu bowing in gratitude.

After nodding magnanimously, Ainz cast [Fly].

He slowly floated up.

This would be a dangerous course of action if anyone was waiting in ambush, but for some reason, Ainz had a feeling that there was nobody around.

“Ainz-sama!”

Shalltear flew over in a panic.

“It’s dangerous! Please descend!”

“Come to think of it, you’re right. It seems I got careless.”

It was only natural that Shalltear would be angry. After all, he had flown up — where anyone could draw a clear line of fire to him — purely because he was acting on a baseless instinct.

“Still, the fact that I was not attacked is further proof that there’s nobody here. Also, there’s a chance that anyone who spotted me might want to come closer to learn more, so I’ll leave perimeter security to you.”

“Please do not use yourself to lure the enemy into a trap.”

Punitto-san had a point; depending on the circumstances, a leader might have to use themselves as bait. ...Still, I guess it’s hard for someone like Shalltear to understand that, given that she isn’t one of my friends, but my protector.

“Forgive me,” Ainz said to Shalltear before looking downwards.

This was a city, filled with many identical buildings, as neatly laid-out as a go board.

“—There’s an impressive-looking building over there, and there and there.”

Although most of the buildings looked like they had been cast from the same mold, there were few which seemed larger than the others.

“Shall we go and look?”

“...Let’s call Aura back first. It feels like things might become very troublesome if there’s an ambush there.”

Everything Shalltear had said since just now had a point.

“Ainz-sama!”

Just then, Aura’s voice came from below. Looking down, he saw Aura and Zenberu waving to Ainz, and given the way they were doing so, it would appear something out of the ordinary had taken place.

“Looks like they’ve found something.”

“It seems that way.”

The two of them exchanged looks before landing alongside Aura, followed shortly by the undead hurrying to their position.

“Come see this, Ainz-sama!”

Aura led them into one of the houses she had opened up.

Ainz gave the place a once-over, but he could not detect any differences from the other buildings, and he found nothing special within it.

“Is this the Dwarven home where Zenberu once stayed?”

“No, this isn’t it. On our way to the home of the Dwarf who took care of Zenberu, we found several buildings that had been opened up. After checking them, I found footprints on the ground, and those might not be Dwarven footprints. Here, have a look. Zenberu, Dwarves don’t go barefoot, right?”

“Ahh, of course not. They all wear shoes, and they don’t take them off even inside their homes. I used to see them in sturdy, metal-soled boots.”

“That means these footprints are clearly not Dwarven.”

“How much can you learn from them?”

“Hmm, let’s see…”

Aura tilted her head in contemplation.

“They seem to have been made by a biped, and the drag marks between the left and right footprints suggest a tail of some sort.”

“Was it something like a Lizardman?”

Shalltear turned to look at Zenberu.

“No, it wasn’t. The tail is slim, not thick like Zenberu’s. Also, the footprints were filled in with dust, so they must have been left there for quite some time. Whoever left them did not go back and forth often. Also, it looks like the person who came in here left immediately after entering. ...Did they come because they were interested in a Dwarven city?”

Aura shifted her gaze from the house to the road outside.

“And it’ wasn’t just one person… there were a lot, at least 10 of them.”

“How far can you follow this trail? This is our only clue, after all, so I’d like to follow up on it as much as possible.”

“Understood. Could you follow behind me, then?”

There was no possible reason to refuse.

Everyone trailed after Aura, while Shalltear stood by behind Aura to protect her.

The owner of the footprints moved as Aura had predicted — it had the same objective as Ainz, wandering around and looking into the Dwarven buildings.

Halfway through the trail, Aura suddenly ground to a halt and stared at the road ahead. She was looking at one of the huge buildings that Ainz had spotted from above.

“There’s many identical footprints here. It looks like a squad of them came from over there. What should we do? Should we investigate this squad?”

“...No, it might be better to see where these footprints’ owners disappeared to. We’ll investigate the other group later.”

“Understood!”

Aura started moving again. In the end, they reached a building that was fused with the walls and seemed to span the entire city.

It looked like a bungalow, but it was huge.

"...There shouldn't be anyone inside, but for safety's sake, I will use magic after this. The enemy's defensive spells might take effect centered on me, so everyone should keep their distance."

Using divination-type magic carried the risk of being targeted by counterattacks. While the only one among them who might actually be killed in one hit by such a backlash was Zenberu, there was no reason to unnecessarily deplete his subordinates' health.

"Ainz-sama, please allow me to guard your person."

"Eh? Then I'll come too."

"No, you need to stay where you won't be affected and watch your surroundings."

After being rebuked by Shalltear, Aura looked pleadingly at Ainz, but in this case, Ainz shared Shalltear's opinion.

"Indeed. Your sensory abilities are the best among us, Aura. While it does not seem likely, if there actually is an ambush, you may end up being the first one to deal with it."

After hearing that from her master, Aura had nothing left to say. All she could do was reluctantly express her acknowledgement.

Ainz conjured a magical sensor and sent it into the building.

As expected, there was no sign of anyone hiding within, and so he sent it deeper inside.

What was this building used for? A counter and — are those lockers? It looks like a bathhouse, but there's no separation for genders… is this a Dwarf-only building?"

As Ainz observed the interiors of several rooms, he found a place that looked like the tunnels through which he and the others had passed through just now.

Could this building be a checkpoint or base of some sort? Maybe it was meant to stop the enemy coming from the depths of this tunnel. Does that mean the tunnel leads somewhere else?

A quick search of the building's interior revealed no trace of the enemy. He quickly summarized the state of the inside of the building, and then let Aura head inside, in order to verify if the footprints ended inside that tunnel.

After that, Ainz, Shalltear and Zenberu followed. He left the magical beasts and undead waiting outside in case the Hanzos returned in the meantime.

As they followed behind Aura, Ainz whispered to Zenberu: "What do you know about this building?"

"Sorry, Your Majesty, but I don't know that much. All I know is that the gigantic building that our company saw just now — the one in front of the building where we picked up the trail of the footprints — was apparently used for administrative tasks. Also, the other big buildings we glimpsed from time to time used to house taverns or blacksmiths and the like. Even the Dwarven chiefs — no, their people in charge — don't live in big houses. I don't know the reason for that," Zenberu concluded.

Just then, Aura stopped at the tunnel's entrance.

"The footprints came from here. Shall we go on?

Ainz was briefly stymied by Aura's question, but it soon passed.

"No, let's not. There's other places to investigate in the city. We'll leave this place to the very end. Also, it would be better to have the Hanzos around for it."

One could also say that the tunnels were very extensive, considering that the Hanzos still had not returned.

After they went back outside, Ainz cast a [Message] spell to speak to the Hanzo Leader.

"What's the matter, Hanzos? Haven't you found anything yet?"

〖Our deepest apologies for taking so long. However, please take heart; though it has taken some time, we have finally found a trace of someone’s presence.〗

“What? Really? Did you discover any evidence about the disappearance of the Dwarves?”

〖This is not proper evidence, but there seems to be something — a sound coming from the depths of this tunnel.〗

“Not a natural sound, I take it?”

〖Indeed! It sounds like someone digging out an ore vein. What should we do? Would it be best if we went forth to investigate?〗

“No, forget it. Before you do that, take us there. Our present location is—”

Come to think of it, he probably could not get the message across clearly using speech alone.

“That’s it, we’ll use a torch as a signal.”

〖Understood!〗

After ending the [Message], Ainz took out a torch. It was self-igniting, and he handed it to one of the undead waiting nearby. The undead creature waved it from side to side, signalling the Hanzos, whose location was unknown.

Of course, this was no ordinary firebrand. It was an artifact sold in shops; it did twice the damage of normal torches when pressed against the bodies of slime-like monsters.

This was somewhat wasteful, but Ainz did not have any ordinary torches with him.

The torch seemed to sear a red band into Ainz’s vision before the the Hanzos finally appeared before him.

“Forgive our tardiness, Master.”

“Dispense with the formalities, time is money. Take us there now.”

“Understood!”

Ainz rode atop a magical beast in pursuit of the running ninjas.

Eventually, they came before a building like the one they found while following the footsteps. The Hanzos stopped here, so this was probably their destination.

After alighting from his beast, Ainz listened to the Hanzos’ explanation of the situation.

“There is a hidden tunnel within this building. The entity in question is inside that tunnel.”

“Ainz-sama, there’s a new set of footprints here. It doesn’t look like it came out of the tunnel, and they only lead inside. The person who made them wore boots, and given their size, I would put them around Shalltear’s height. Also, there’s only one of them.”

Ainz nodded to Aura, who was staring at the ground in front of the building.

“...Let’s try to open a friendly dialogue with this person. Even if they attack, you are only allowed to defend yourselves. Under no circumstances are we to make the first move. Do you understand? In order to avoid alarming the other party, we’ll have Aura try to talk to them, and then—”

Ainz touched his face.

Were humans the only species that shunned the undead? Or was it a given fact of this world?

In any case, his subordinates still stood at the head of an undead army. That being the case, he might make a better impression by exposing his face and not hiding his identity.

“Alright, Hanzos. Take us to where you heard that sound.”

The Hanzos led them through the building and into the tunnel.

The ceiling was fairly low, so it should have been excavated by Dwarves. Dwarves in YGGDRASIL were universally short in stature.

If they had dug this tunnel, it would probably be around this height.

Aura’s ears twitched as they moved through the tunnel. That confirmed the accuracy of the Hanzos’ report.

Ainz strained to listen, but he could not pick up the sound Aura had heard.

“Is that it? ...Is it close?”

“It’s hard to tell. I can’t judge the distance accurately because of the echoes.”

“Umu. If it’s in a straight line, an arcane eye would be able to reveal the other side’s identity…”

Someone without Aura’s keen hearing — derived from racial or job classes — would not be able to hear anything due to the distance between them. However, if they drew closer, the other party might pick up on the presence of a long procession on the move.

If anyone heard an unknown group approaching them, their first instinct would probably be to flee for their own safety. Of course, having Aura around meant that they would not be able to escape, but the opposition might still be able to elude her if they could [Teleport] or if they had skills which allowed them to meld into the earth.

The wisest decision would be to send Aura and the Hanzos, or for Ainz himself to go, since he could go invisible.

“Then, we’ll send out the stealth-capable people from this point on. Aura and the Hanzos, you’ll go first. I will follow. Shalltear, you should wait here.”

“If that is your order.”

“...No, would it be a bad idea to wait here?”

Ainz looked to the ceiling. It looked like sturdy bedrock, but there were no such things as absolutes.

“Fair enough. Return to the building from earlier and wait for us to return. ...No, if I do that, the Hanzos will also… Aura, do you think the footprints lead toward the source of the sound?”

“Yes, they’re heading there. The person who made them is probably the source of the sound.”

“I see. Then, can you lead me there?”

Aura nodded.

“Then, the two of us will go ahead first. Everyone except Aura and myself will proceed to the building at the entrance of the tunnel. If anything untoward happens, particularly the appearance of powerful beings on our level, fall back immediately. In that case, we will make our own escape, so do not be worried. The destination for any [Gates] will be Aura’s building in the forest.”

“Understood! But will the two of you really be alright by yourselves?”

“I’m not sure. Well, I’d like to think that we’ll be fine.”

One could consider flaws all day long and end up nowhere. All he could do was accept that he was compromising his safety to some extent as he took action. This was something Ainz had learned recently.

Shalltear had not said anything which made him want to change his mind. Or rather, it might be that Ainz’s orders left no room for objection, so all she could do was obey gracefully.

Ainz set out with Aura. He did not use magic yet since they were still some distance away.

The two of them walked in silence for some time, and then the sound reached Ainz's ears.

"...It seems whoever's doing this is doing their best to minimize the amount of noise generated."

Ainz had no idea why that topic came up, but if Aura mentioned it, then it should probably be correct.

"Does that mean we can assume the other side is on high alert as well?"

"So should we start by capturing them?"

"Only if they seek to flee. After all, if our first contact is violent, it might be very difficult to have friendly relations with them in the future."

"I understand. Then, let me go ahead and talk to them normally."

"Proceed. Then, I shall make myself invisible — no, for safety's sake, I'll follow behind you while invisible, Aura. If the other party makes a run for it, then we'll have no choice but to capture them."

Part 2

After a brief discussion, the two of them prepared themselves and headed for the maker of the sound.

There was a Dwarf-shaped creature in the depths of the tunnel. In this pitch-black world, all they saw was him diligently digging at the walls of the tunnel with his pickaxe.

They were some distance away so they could not be sure, but he seemed to be around 140cm tall. His body was shaped like a beer barrel and his legs were not long. In fact, it was instantly clear that his legs were short.

He wore a brown-colored cape, and the items laid out nearby should all have been his property as well. One of them was an unlit lantern and a water flask.

What's a miner doing all by himself in an uninhabited city? This is strange. Let's ask him and solve this mystery.

Aura silently crept towards the miner.

In contrast, Ainz did not seem to care.

[Perfect Unknowable] erased one's traces and sounds, making the caster very difficult to detect if one did not have very high-level thief-type job classes. Even someone of Aura's level would have a very hard time spotting him. Ainz registered on her senses as a vague presence.

Once she was close enough to the miner, Aura called out to him.

"Heya. Whatcha doing?"

"Hiiieeee!"

The miner wailed like he was about to die as he turned to face her.

His beard was long — there was no doubt that he belonged to the Dwarven race.

The wide-eyed man pulled his brown cape tight around himself.

However, that was all. The man was still there. However, it would seem Ainz was the only one who thought that way.

“Hmph! Invisibility, huh—”

Aura’s voice made Ainz — who could see through invisibility — look carefully in the Dwarf’s direction. Just as Aura had said, the Dwarf’s image seemed somewhat fainter.

The cape must be a magic item, and doing that probably activates its powers of invisibility. Feels pretty much the same as Shizu...

“Hey, hey, you know I don’t intend to hurt you, right, Dwarf-san? I know you’re there. Let me take a look at you.”

Aura’s adorable and heart-warming tone must have had a great impact on the Dwarf’s heart.

He parted his cape slightly, and peeked at Aura through the slit.

“Are, are you a Dark Elf? What are you doing here?”

“Hm? When I came to the Dwarven city, I found that it was an empty shell, so I decided to find out why there was nobody around. I looked around and here I am.”

“I, I see…”

“Dwarves were still living here until five years ago. Where are they now? Did something happen? And speaking of which, why not let me take a look at you?”

The Dwarf shifted slowly, but Aura followed him with her eyes.

“Sure enough. It seems you really can see me.”

The Dwarf folded up his cape. That was probably to terminate the effects of the magic. It all seemed quite comical to Ainz, given that nothing had changed from his perspective.

“Then, let’s start afresh. How do you do? I am Aura Bella Fiora, from the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“The Sorcerous Kingdom? Forgive me for my ignorance, but is that a Dark Elven Kingdom? Something like that? Oh, pardon me. I am Gondo Firebeard of the Dwarven Kingdom. Pleased to meet you.”

Aura extended a hand. Gondo seemed to pick up on the meaning of the gesture and wiped off his own dirt-stained hand before shaking.

Things seem to be progressing well. Ainz nodded as he watched the proceedings, still sustaining his spell of unknowability.

“Well, I guess we don’t need to be so formal. How about speaking normally?”

“Ohhh! I was about to ask that myself. I am a mere commoner myself. But if you were an important figure, then all I can do is keep quiet.”

Aura saw Gondo’s smile, and she smiled in turn.

“Then, back to the previous question. There were Dwarves still living here five years back. Where did they go?”

“Mm, they all moved to another city three years ago. Is something the matter?”

“Yeah, sort of. I came here with a Lizardman who said he stayed here for a while. He told me about this place.”

“A Lizardman? Five years ago?”

Gondo thought briefly, and then he slapped his palm.

“Ohhh! I didn’t see him myself, but I know that it did happen. It was the first time a Lizardman visited us, so it became quite a hot topic. I believe he was a fellow with an exceptionally thick arm, am I correct?”

“That’s right! That’s him.”

Gondo muttered “I see, I see” to himself over and over again. A look in his eyes suggested that he had lowered his guard.

“The person who was kind to that Lizardman seems to have moved as well. Could you tell me where he went?”

“Well, telling you should be fine… But I’ve heard that Dark Elves don’t dwell beneath the earth, am I right? Even if you knew the underground way there, could you reach it safely?”

“Well, I think it would be fine, but if possible, I’d like to know the aboveground route as well.”

Gondo scrunched up his bearded face.

“Oh, I must apologize. I rarely travel the surface, so I’m not confident in describing the route to Feoh Gēr — that is to say, the city that they moved to. All I can give are rough directions, like so and so kilometers north, and so on.”

“That’s fine too. Actually, I wanted to ask you to lead the way… What if I hired you? You’ll be paid, of course…”

“What an attractive proposal. Still, did you — no, you mentioned the Lizardman just now — did the two of you come here by yourselves? You’re not an adult yet, right? How many people came with you?”

“Quite a few. Still, if we all came in, it would cause problems, so I had them wait at the tunnel entrance.”

“Entrance? ...Hm?”

Gondo fell into thought, as though he had just remembered something. Still, that was only for an instant. He cast it aside and continued speaking.

“Well, that’s a relief. Walking by yourself in a tunnel… that’s not a good idea. You’re not an underground-dweller so you probably don’t know, but some monsters can swim freely through the earth. It’s not a place where someone can go alone, you know? Well, if you had my magical gear, you might be able to do something about it…”

He glanced repeatedly at Aura’s outfit to see if she had any magic items.

“Well then, I need to complain to your comrades. Sending a child out alone is a terrible disgrace for adults.”

Gondo turned his back towards Aura and tossed a chunk of rock into a bag which had been laid out beside him.

The bag did not swell up. It must have been a magic item as well. Then, he picked up the nearby lantern, and pulled up the shutter.

A surprising blue glow — a magical glow — illuminated the tunnel. Until now, the two of them had been conversing in complete darkness.

“Then, let’s go. It seems you can see in complete darkness, but a little light would help, right? … Well, it greatly raises the chances of being spotted by monsters, so I don’t recommend it. Do you have a way to flee if a monster attacks? They aren’t very common here, but you can’t rule out the possibility entirely.”

Ainz nodded. The Dwarf did not know Aura’s power, so it was quite admirable for him to take this mature attitude with her. However, Ainz felt that Gondo’s caution was not enough. He should have taken various possibilities into consideration before advising her.

“Don’t worry. I can escape by myself just fine, and I’m not alone either.”

Aura looked towards Ainz. However, her line of sight seemed to be slightly off.

“Hm? Really now? I have a Cloak of Invisibility, so you can abandon me and flee. However, the monsters that burrow through the earth can sense their opponents’ location through vibrations in the ground. Therefore, I wanted to warn you not to move carelessly.”

With a grunt, Gondo shouldered his bag and rose to his feet.

“Let’s go, then.”

Gondo headed forward. Aura and the still-unknowable Ainz followed closely behind.

“Come to think of it, you mentioned earlier that this place was not safe, but wasn’t this once a Dwarven city? What made it so dangerous that you had to evacuate?”

“Well, it wasn’t this city, but our current capital, Feoh Gēr. It lies to the northeast. We spotted Quagoa (Tunnelling Beastmen) nearby. It would be a tragedy if our cities were destroyed piecemeal, so we decided to temporarily abandon this city — Feoh Raiđō.”

“Quagoa? What kind of race are they?”

“Umu. They’re underground dwellers like we are… but they’re troublesome fellows. Things are bad enough between us that it’s kill-on-sight when we encounter each other.”

Gondo rambled on about the Quagoa as he walked through the tunnel. This was probably to keep Aura on her toes as well.

At a glance, they were bipedal demihumans who resembled moles. They were about 140cm tall, weighed about 70kg on average, and they had short but powerful builds.

They were predominantly dark brown, with black and brown being less common. Special colors like blue or red apparently denoted an individual of some power.

They lived in places where light could not penetrate, but their vision was stronger than those of human beings.

Their technology level was low, on par if not lower than the Lizardmen. They could not make armor or weapons, probably because their own bodies — their claws and fur — were superior to subpar wargear.

The fur that covered their entire bodies was about as tough as metal armor, and it could dissipate blows from metal weapons. The fur grew tougher if they fed on rare metals in their youth. One could tell their resistance to damage by the color of their fur.

From a YGGDRASIL player's point of view, one could say that they probably possessed a racial skill related to damage resistance — in this case, the damage of metal weapons. The question now was how resistant to metal weapons they were. It was unlikely that their damage resistance was broken to the point of complete immunity, but it still warranted investigation.

Then there were their claws — like those of armadillos and anteaters — which could even pierce steel.

"Those guys, huh… I think we found traces of them in the city just now."

Gondo suddenly stopped and turned to face Aura.

"What did you say? Is this their nest now? It's become just like that place!"

"That place… Well, it doesn't feel like they've taken up residence here. I think they probably just came as scouts. Still, if you were going to abandon this place, why not destroy it?"

"That's true, but we don't intend to abandon this place forever. Once our armies are ready, we intend to take it back. As you can see, there's a lot of ore here, like in the place where I was digging just now."

"Hm~"

The two of them walked on in silence. Gaps in conversations were commonplace, and if they did not fill the space with a new topic quickly, their dialogue would end here. Ainz judged that they had asked everything that could be asked, and decided to show himself. It might be better to tell Gondo about himself before he left the tunnels and saw the undead.

"Then, it's about time I introduced myself."

Ainz said that, but thanks to the [Perfect Unknowable] spell which was still in effect, his voice did not reach the two of them.

Feeling a little embarrassed, Ainz dispelled the magic.

Perhaps Gondo sensed Ainz's presence behind Aura, but he turned around, and his eyes widened into saucers. His expression underwent a surprising and complex series of changes. Bafflement, shock, terror, confusion, and then—

"—Geehhhhhh!"

Ainz wondered if he had made a sound which might have disturbed him, but Gondo gripped Aura's hand tightly.

"Amon, a mon—! Ruh, run away! Quickly, run away!!"

However, Aura knew the person who had appeared, and had no reason to run.

"Come on, hurry up and run!!!"

Gondo could not move, as though he had been chained to a great boulder.

"It, it's so heavy! What's wrong! Did something happen to me?!"

"Fear not… Gondo."

As Ainz spoke, Gondo's frightened face twitched.

"How, how do you know my name! Did you see through me!!! Or was it magic!!!!!"

I should have worn the mask after all, Ainz thought. Then, he spoke calmly, so as not to agitate Gondo any further.

"Calm down. I merely overheard your conversation. I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown, ruler of the Sorcerous Kingdom."

Gondo's face underwent another series of changes, and this time Gondo's eyes flickered between Aura and Ainz.

“The, the Sorcerous Kingdom? Is the Sorcerous Kingdom not a nation of Dark Elves?”

“No. It is a country of various species which acknowledge me as their King.”

“...Eh? Seriously?”

There was only wariness and suspicion within the eyes of Gondo, while his tone was taut with apprehension.

“One of the undead, huh… So that’s not a mask? Eh? You mean those undead? Those beings who hate and slaughter the living?”

“Hey, it’s just as Ainz-sama said. He wasn’t lying at all. I’m a Dark Elf and the story about the Lizardman coming here was true too. Ainz-sama’s been with me ever since I met you, you know? Like I said, I didn’t come alone.”

“Eh? I thought my ears deceived me. But…”

Gondo mumbled to himself, and then took several deep breaths before putting a determined expression on his face and asking:

“Could it be that Your Majesty — may I use that term? Ah, was Your Majesty formerly a Dark Elf?”

That was an unexpected question. The correct answer was probably that he was an undead being of human origin. Ainz paused briefly to consider his answer, and then replied according to his predictions:

“No, I am a natural-born undead creature… although I don’t know if that’s the right term to use. —Well, there’s no need to be afraid. Human, Dwarves and Elves all have good and bad members of their species, right? Similarly, there are undead who hate the living, and those who seek friendly relations with them. Naturally, I belong to the latter group.”

“But, but friendly undead, that’s about as unthinkable as compassionate demons…”

That was pretty well said, Ainz thought as he shrugged.

“Really? I know of an angel who fell into the darkness and a demon who aspired to the light...”

The demon in question was an NPC in YGGDRASIL, called Mephistopheles. He was a character who was famous for spouting tsundere lines to good-aligned beings. He looked fearsome but was surprisingly friendly and logical, and he gave out missions that ranged from trivial to high-level, which made him almost as popular as the Dark Young.

“To think such things actually existed…”

Ainz shrugged at the shocked Gondo.

“I understand your caution. However, I only ask that you remember this. I have no intention of harming you. Let him go, Aura.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama.”

Halfway through, the person holding onto the other’s hand had changed from Gondo to Aura, and naturally, their intentions for doing so was exactly the opposite to each other.

Gondo stumbled back quite a distance once Aura let go of him, but he did not appear to be fleeing.

A very rational move, Ainz mused. A misstep could have led Gondo to make the emotional choice of fleeing. That would not have ended well for him. However, Gondo as he was now qualified as someone who could be negotiated with.

“Then, shall we start again? I understand your caution, but I — we have no intention of harming you. Rather, we would like to be friends with you.”

Gondo did not respond. As expected, he was still peeking at Ainz with doubt written all over his face.

“In particular, my nation would like to sign a treaty of friendship with the Dwarven Kingdom. Therefore, we have no intention of harming any Dwarven citizens.”

“And what do you mean by a treaty of friendship?”

“...Pardon me. It’s best not to mention national-level issues to an individual who cannot represent a nation, don’t you think?”

“Mm. That’s right, ah, no, I mean, it is as you say—”

“—Don’t worry. Both phrasings are fine. Dealing with someone who stumbles over their words is tiresome.”

Ainz’s relaxed answer drew the first bitter smile from Gondo ever since they had met.

“Thank you very much — Your Majesty. And if the words of this girl — this young lady are true, I take it you came to this city for that purpose?”

“Indeed, that is so. But Gondo, why don’t we leave the tunnel first? Talking to the Lizardman who came with us might be a good idea. You’ve heard of him before, haven’t you? Also, I’d like to discuss the matter of the Quagoa with you.”

“Hmm…”

Gondo narrowed his eyes at Aura.

Aura smiled, as though to say, “who, me?”

“Alright. It seems this little lady has a lot of trust in you. And it’s clear that that you’re no ordinary undead.”

Gondo walked before them, while Aura and Ainz followed him through the tunnel.

“That’s right, might I ask you a question?”

“What is it?” Gondo replied as he turned back to look at Ainz.

“I would like to know more about the runic characters and the craft related to them.”

Gondo’s brow bunched up, his eyebrows squishing up into steep slopes.

“What do you want to know about runes? What’s there to ask?”

The unhappiness was plainly audible in Gondo’s voice.

Until recently Ainz could sense confusion and fear while talking to him, but there was no anger. In other words, Gondo’s rancor was entirely due to that simple question. Did he recall a bad memory concerning runes, or was this some sort of secret that could not be revealed to non-Dwarves?

Ainz hesitated. *Should I continue asking?*

Gondo was the first Dwarf he had encountered. Upsetting him was not wise. However, if he could learn the source of the anger, it could prove beneficial when negotiating with the Dwarven Kingdom.

Of course, that assumed Gondo’s anger did not spring from a personal reason.

Ainz coldly considered whether he needed to eliminate Gondo as he shared what he knew about the runes. Granted, most of that was parroted from Tabula Smaragdina.

The truth was that he did not know much. He knew how many different characters there were and that they were a form of writing, but that was it.

He barely remembered the individual meanings of each character, so he had to fumble through the description.

In contrast, a dramatic change occurred in Gondo.

He halted in his tracks, and turned back.

His face was twisted in a grip of a completely different emotion. He was overflowing with excitement.

“You… who are you… no… the Sorcerer King… an ageless, eternal undead being… lost knowledge…”

He could hear Gondo muttering to himself. There was no meaning in his words. It appeared to be an unconscious response.

Ainz held out a hand to stop Aura, who was anxious and had been preparing to make a move since Gondo did not answer immediately. It would be best to let him think this through first.

After Gondo got himself together, he studied Ainz intently. His attitude still spoke of wariness towards Ainz, but it seemed to have been supplanted by some other emotion.

“I know of more runes than these. There are 50 lesser runes, 25 middle runes, 10 upper runes, and 5 top runes, for a total of 90. That said, many of them have been lost, and only a few are left. Exactly how many secret and divine-class runes there are is the stuff of legends.”

“Really now… there might be some differences, but the runes I know of look like this. Do you recognize them?”

Ainz traced a rune from his memory on the ground.

“Ho! This is one of the middle runes, Lagu.”
(TL Note: this is an Anglo-Saxon rune meaning “lake”.)

Although Ainz did not know why there were so many of them, it was certain enough that some of them matched the ones which Gondo knew.

“I understand. Then, please continue telling me about the runes.”

What Ainz really wanted to know was who taught this knowledge and information related to other players . However, that question would be best addressed to a historian. For the time being, he would build a knowledge base with other related information.

“About 100 years ago, the Dwarves exported rune-carved magical weapons to a human nation to the east of these mountains — the Empire. However, the flow of such weapons stopped after that. What is the reason for that?”

What he really wanted to know was whether a player died 100 years ago, but pushing too eagerly for such information could end up exposing him. Ainz had been contemplating this question for some time now, and it seemed like a good question since it did not run the risk of leaking anything about himself.

Gondo’s face darkened. He paused briefly, and then continued walking.

“This will take a long time. Let’s talk as we walk.”

“Umu...”

For a while, the only sound audible in the tunnel was the footsteps from the three of them.

He’s probably silent because he’s smoothing over the gloominess in his heart.

“Firstly, my friends know me as the rune developer.”

Does that mean he gave himself that title?

Gondo continued speaking without waiting for Ainz to respond.

“Dwarven magic items have always been made with runes. But 200 years ago, we were attacked by the Demon Gods, and the last remaining royals left our Kingdom to join the fight against them. Technology from the outside flowed in and as a result, runes were regarded as outdated.”

Gondo produced a sword from his pack and gave it to Ainz. There was a runic character on the blade’s body.

“This is Cuern, a lesser rune which means ‘sharpness’. When carefully engraved, it creates a magic sword. Its effect is to increase the weapon’s sharpness and makes it easier to inflict deep wounds upon the enemy.”

"This is a very basic effect on magic weapons, no? The time it takes to inscribe a rune depends on the amount of bonus damage the rune adds. That said, I've heard that it should not take long to complete a low-end weapon, am I correct?"

"That is exactly why runecraft fell behind the times. The same item takes three times longer to make with runecraft as compared to other methods. From a mass-production point of view, it isn't even in the same league as the enchantments of mankind."

Gondo sighed deeply.

"Thanks to superior technology from the outside, the number of runesmiths who could inscribe runes gradually dwindled. That was because everyone felt that it was better to become a magic caster, who could perform enchantments."

That was probably why the flow of weapons into the Empire had stopped. Ainz understood that much. In other words, the ancient traditions and crafts had died out.

Gondo narrowed his eyes.

"Still, abandoning our Dwarven techniques was utterly foolish! More to the point, runecraft has its merits too! For instance, you don't need to spend money on it!"

Gondo's voice echoed through the tunnel. After realising how dangerous it was to get worked up in a place like this, he took a deep breath. That, in turn, allowed him to speak more calmly.

"Did you know? The typical enchantment costs a lot in reagents and supplies."

That was correct. Ainz had once heard that half the market price of magic items came from the ingredients.

While the production cost for magic items was abnormally high, one could ignore markups from suppliers and retailers when calculating their price. That was because the Magician's Guild did not collect administrative fees —

probably because they felt that those were included in their yearly dues — and so magic casters could sell directly at no further cost, or negotiate directly with their clients.

Therefore, when one sold them through a retailer of magic items, the price would go up.

“However, in contrast, rune-empowered items have hardly any material costs.”

“That’s amazing!”

Ainz suddenly leaned forward.

He had agonized over this expense many times, both as the adventurer Momon and as the ruler of Nazarick. Therefore, the wonderful idea of something being “almost free” was very dear to Ainz’s heart.

That was why he could not understand it. In truth, Ainz would never have allowed such a technique to die out.

“...Are there any other flaws?”

“Ah, those do exist. Mainly, they’re hard to produce. Taking too long to make is one thing, but there’s too few people who are suited to becoming runesmiths as well. According to the people of the Empire, there’s fewer of them than those who can become magic casters.”

“Hm. I have a question. While you said that runes fell out of fashion 200 years ago, why does the title of rune developer still exist? Isn’t it too late for that sort of thing? Or is that normal for the Dwarven lifespan?”

Gondo did not respond, so Ainz asked another question.

“What sort of runecraft are you developing now?”

Ainz took several steps forward, coming up alongside Gondo.

Gondo’s face was fixed forward, with none of his passion from before. He simply answered Ainz’s question with another question.

“Why do you wish to know about runecraft?”

Answering a question with a question implied that he did not want to give a proper reply. If he could give the answer Gondo sought, he should be able to uncover what he was hiding. After all, he had gone from addressing him as “Your Majesty” to “you”. This must surely be an important question.

However, they were not close enough that they could bare their hearts to each other. And more importantly—

Why is he leaking this knowledge? Is it a trap? Or does he not know the importance of the information he holds? ...If it really is a secret art, he should understand what that means, right?

It was somewhat confusing, but for the time being, he would give him the explanation for his motives which he had prepared beforehand.

“It’s because these runes differ slightly from the ones which I know of. You understand how someone can be interested in the historical background and spread of runecraft, no? If so, I hope you can answer my question.”

Gondo looked away, and fell into contemplation. They continued walking forward in silence for a while.

Just as Ainz was starting to get restless, Gondo finally answered him.

“I’m now experimenting with reducing the time it takes to performing runic enchantment, as well as a way to mass produce them. However, that is only a means to an end. My final objective is to develop techniques that make runes essential. In other words, I want to make runecraft unique and able to stand the test of time.”

In other words, he wanted to add value to runes. The boss of any company would understand that motivation. When developing a product, it was quite common for that point to be repeatedly emphasized, to the point of revulsion.

“Hoho. That’s pretty amazing research, is it not? How is it progressing?”

He did not think he would actually get an answer, but Ainz had asked that question anyway because he was confused on one point. Namely, that anyone who was developing a new technology like this should be a VIP in the Dwarven Kingdom.

I have no idea why he’s out here by himself, collecting samples in such a dangerous place. Shouldn’t someone like him be better guarded?

Ainz’s question was immediately answered.

“Not at all. There hasn’t been any progress,” Gondo mumbled in a depressed tone. “People who use runecraft to make magic items are called runesmiths, but I’m nowhere near amazing enough to be addressed by that title. I can’t even do what an apprentice should be capable of.”

Eh? Ainz mouthed in surprise. Did that not mean that someone who could not even apply proper runes was trying to advance the field of runecraft? This was an utterly ridiculous situation.

Could he really make any breakthroughs like this, or was this very normal for them?

No, this could not possibly be normal. If it was normal, Gondo would not have been so depressed. In other words, he too must have felt that he was merely fumbling around.

In truth, Ainz was in quite a quandary. He had no idea how to make use of Gondo.

“I’m not talented. I can carve runes, but it takes too long for me to do so… although, they say all runesmiths have to pass through this phase before they can grow. But other runesmiths progressed forward instead of being stuck at a plateau like me.”

Gondo drooped his head powerlessly.

“I’m no good as a runesmith. I’m just a useless descendant that my great father left behind.”

I see, Ainz mused. *So his problem was simply a lack of talent.*

After considering the knowledge from this world and that of YGGDRASIL, he was quite sure that this was the case.

One needed ten other levels in certain job classes before being able to take levels in the runesmith career. However, if his overall level cap was 11, then he would not be able to gain further levels as a runesmith. And if he had only one level of runesmith, he would only be able to learn skills of no great import.

There was nothing Ainz could do to help Gondo, so he said nothing else.

There were times when comforting someone could save them, and times when all they could do was give up.

If Ainz were in Gondo’s situation, he would not want someone he had met for the first time to comfort him either.

“...Is that so. Speaking of which, do all Dwarves have the goal of advancing runecraft and developing new techniques for it?”

“No, I’m the only one who does that,” Gondo replied, with a terribly lonely laugh. “All the runesmiths have given up on their craft. There’s nobody left who wants to break free of the current state of runecraft and develop new technology for it. They all feel that it’s alright to abandon it.”

“I see… Then, there’s something I’d like to know. What will you do after developing new runecraft techniques?”

“What will I do? I just want to use runecraft to enchant things and increase the number of runesmiths. Runes are an amazing technology. It would be a terrible waste to let them die out.”

“Is anyone helping you in this?”

“No. Like I said, almost all the runesmiths have given up their craft and spend their days drinking and cursing bitterly about how it’s going to die out with their generation. I’ve tried to talk them around in the past, but they all rejected me.”

“...Hm. Well, the weak perish. It’s only natural for useless technology to vanish.”

Gondo suddenly glared at Ainz, but his gaze lost its strength within moments.

As he watched Gondo hang his head and move on, Ainz contemplated the value of runes.

Frankly speaking, he had no interest in them beyond their historical involvement with players.

However, abandoned arts could be developed on the cheap, and a brief investment might not be a bad idea. The concept of not having to spend money was also very attractive. In addition, he wanted to collect rare technologies.

Also, if other players appeared, one could use their interest in runes as an excellent lure.

“...I have a question or two. What basis do you have that techniques like what you mentioned earlier can be developed? What I heard just now sounds like empty fantasies thought up by someone who knows nothing about the craft.”

“That’s not true! Well, it’s true that I don’t have the talent to be a proper runesmith. But my father, and my father’s father — my grandfather — were both the top runesmiths of this country, and they served the last royal — the Runesmith King — as his right and left hands. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I’ve read the literature and theses my father and grandfather left behind. I’m sure it’s possible! My father confirmed my theories on his sickbed. He told me it was difficult but not impossible!”

Gondo looked like he was going to cough up blood with his words as tears welled up at the edges of his eyes.

The feelings and thoughts he had long kept inside of him had finally burst forth.

Though that torrent of emotion crashed against him, Ainz remained unmoved. While Gondo's words made him hope that the Dwarf's research would bear fruit, the fact was that Ainz merely wanted access to rare techniques which might have otherwise been lost. If Gondo could not deliver concrete results, then Ainz would give up on him.

"It's true that I'm useless as a son! Still, I don't want to let the art which my ancestors passed down die out! I won't let the glorious name of my father vanish from the history books, no matter what I have to do!"

And then, those words struck a chord with Ainz.

He too wished to preserve all the things left by his comrades in Ainz Ooal Gown. He wanted them to endure for all time.

In that instant, Ainz could understand Gondo's feelings deep in the marrow of his bones.

His affection gauge maxed out in a flash.

At the same time, he understood why Gondo went on and on about runecraft.

To him, runecraft was dead, or perhaps, close to death. Thus, he had no reason to hide it. For all he knew, he might have wanted to let it spread as far and wide as possible, so it could survive in one way or another. Of course, he did not know if he had thought that far ahead.

"...Forgive me. This might anger you, but I hope you will permit me to say this. From my point of view, you are you, and you are neither your father nor your grandfather. Am I wrong?"

An inexplicable blend of emotions appeared on Gondo's face. It was hard to tell if he was angry, hurt or touched. But it eventually faded into dejection.

"—Your Majesty, I am very grateful to you. But I have already decided my reason for living."

“Then, allow me — no, the Sorcerous Kingdom to provide the financial assistance for your endeavours. Allow me to become your patron and aid you in the advancement of runecraft.”

Gondo’s eyes went wide, and he exclaimed in shock:

“You, are you serious? This, this is incredibly good fortune… this is unbelievable!”

There must be some catch to this unimaginably tempting offer. Anyone would think that way. Ainz understood how Gondo must feel.

“Well, all I can say is that I hope you can believe me. However, someone like you who isn’t a runesmith probably won’t be able to develop those techniques you were talking about, am I right?”

Gondo’s mouth pressed flat, and he went silent.

“Therefore, I wish to recruit all the runesmiths in the Dwarven Kingdom to my country, to work on developing runecraft techniques under your direction.”

“What, what does that mean?”

“It means exactly what it implies. I will gather all the runesmiths and compare their knowledge to serve as the prototypes for new techniques. For that reason… I hope you can help me recruit them. Is that impossible?”

Gondo considered it, and then replied

“No, it should be doable. Almost all the runesmiths have given up on their craft, but there should be a lot of them hoping for a chance to shine.”

“And then you will move their hearts… then, Gondo. How about it? Will you help me? WIll you give your soul to me? How far are you willing to go for me?”

“What?”

“It will be very difficult to revive an almost-lost art if you do not focus all the runesmiths on a single objective. This is why you cannot slack off on the recruitment of talent. I want to bring all the runesmiths to my country. Thus, it is quite likely that I may have to employ certain... unsavory methods. This may lead to my collaborators performing actions which might be termed treason to this country.”

“What, was that it? The answer is simple. If you want my soul, then take it all, the whole thing. It is a small price to pay in order to make runecraft live forever.”

Gondo extended his hand.

Ainz took it.

“I am undead. Does that sit well with you?”

Gondo laughed at Ainz’s words.

“As long as you can make my dream come true, I don’t care if Your Majesty is undead or the fearsome Lord of the Frost Dragons.”

“Then, first things first, can you lead us to the Dwarven Kingdom? I plan to sign a treaty of friendship with the Dwarven King in order to recruit runesmiths for my country. After all, it would be difficult to recruit people if our countries have no ties between them. In addition, I believe the Dwarven Kingdom has strict controls on the export of technology, am I correct?”

“That should be fine. There’s hardly any demand for runecraft. Ah, also, the Dwarven Kingdom no longer has a King. The country is ruled by a regent council which is headed by several leaders.”

“Umu. I’d like to hear about that. Can you talk as we walk? I’d like to hear a rough outline of it.”

As Gondo spoke to him, the exit to the tunnel finally appeared before their eyes.

After the three of them emerged, they were welcomed by Shalltear, among others. Naturally, Zenberu was there as well.

Although Gondo had been expecting a mass of undead, he could not help but take a defensive stance as he saw the magical beasts as well. The fact that "there are no Dark Elves" had already dealt him a blow, but now his mumbling reached Ainz's ears.

Shalltear quietly stepped forward and bowed.

"Ainz-sama. Forgive me for bothering you just as you returned, but there is a slight problem."

"...Where are the rest of the Hanzos? What happened?"

"Yes! Actually, someone else entered this cave, through the tunnel in the building to which Aura guided you. My deepest apologies for only telling you now, but I have already sent some of the Hanzos to investigate."

"There's no need to apologize, Shalltear. You chose wisely. We'll wait for the Hanzos to return, analyze their reports, and then decide what to do. Then—"

He paused, then glanced at the Dwarf who had once stayed here. The Dwarf was not paying attention to the events on this side. Instead, he was engaged in an animated conversation with Zenberu. Listening closely, it seemed to concern the Dwarf that had saved Zenberu.

"—Gondo. Pardon me for a moment, but it seems someone has infiltrated this city. There is a possibility that the use of force will be warranted here. When the time comes, I hope you will serve as a witness to your nation that such a course of action could not be avoided."

"Of course. Leave that to me. Although, I hope you will limit any damage caused to a minimum."

Ainz nodded. It was only natural to avoid obstacles that would affect future negotiations.

"Shalltear, how's our perimeter?"

“I’ve already dispersed Aura’s beasts into the vicinity… How’s that, Aura?”

“That should work. Even if the enemy can turn invisible, my beasts can still sniff them out.”

“I see. Then let’s wait for the Hanzos to return.”

After a while, they did.

According to them, the opposition seemed to be Quagoas. There were over 100 of them. Gondo was listening from the side and seemed quite shocked. This was far in excess of a mere scouting force; in all likelihood, this was a combat group, or a migrating tribe.

There was only one course of action Ainz could take.

“...Shalltear. Capture them all. Can you do that?”

“If that is your command.”

“Then I command you to do so. Do you understand why I want you to capture them?”

“It is to question them and prevent word about us from leaking out.”

Ainz nodded grandly.

“Correct. If we only capture one of them alive, then we can only interrogate one of them. This increases the chance that we might be compromised and that we might end up learning false information. In addition, we must consider that we may need to make an example of them.”

There was one more thing Ainz did not mention because Gondo was there — that simply believing one side of the story might turn out poorly for them. Who knew, it might be better to strike a deal with the Quagoa than the Dwarves.

“Go then, Shalltear. I await your good news.”

Part 3

Shalltear and her underlings picked up the pace as they headed towards the location of the Quagoa. They leapt from roof to roof at breakneck speeds. Since she was already in armor, she did not have to worry about the several layers of breast pads within her clothing.

She glanced back at Aura, who was following from behind.

The fact that she was being followed by a Guardian — who was supposed to stay by her Master's side — was proof that he did not trust her.

That was only natural.

She might not remember her failure, but she had heard the details from others.

Although her compassionate Master had said "Shalltear, you did nothing wrong", that could not possibly be true. Thus, she had been waiting for a chance to scrub away the stink of failure from herself, but sadly that chance had not come.

Aura might have comforted her, but that was not what Shalltear wanted.

Shalltear looked ahead, her gaze full of strength. She would not allow herself to make any mistakes on this journey.

Before long, they reached a building near their objective. Shalltear looked down on the Quagoa from its roof.

There were many silhouettes visible, of the kind that the Hanzos had described.

"Now then — what shall I do…"

Shalltear pondered the matter.

Aura should have heard what she said, but Aura merely folded her arms, intent on remaining silent. That too, was expected. Before Aura had come here, her Master gave her an order: “Keep an eye on Shalltear’s movements. If she looks like she’s about to begin massacring them, make her stop by any means, even if you have to hit her. Apart from that, you are not to interfere with Shalltear’s battle plans.”

Shalltear had also been told that Aura would merely observe from behind, and she was not to be used in any combat operations. In other words, the entire operation, from planning to execution, was solely Shalltear’s responsibility.

Firstly, she had to perfectly and elegantly fulfil her Master’s orders.

She unclenched her fists.

“Hanzos.”

“Yes!”

The ninja-costumed minions gathered before her.

“I want to make sure that none of them escape. Can you verify that there’s nobody else in the tunnel?”

“Certainly. We await your command.”

As expected of her Master’s minions. Their enemy would have no means of retreat now. The next thing she had to worry about was if the enemy was scattered throughout the city. Of course, she could take some time to hunt down and root them all out, but she wanted to avoid wasting time. While her Master had not given her a time limit, wasting too much time was proof of incompetence.

“Alright. How about this...”

Shalltear relayed the details of the plan she had thought up on the way here.

She would surround the enemy, and then disable everyone within the perimeter.

In other words, she would use the Hanzos to cut off their retreat, then compact them into a mass before taking them all out in one blow.

Granted, this plan was a little dangerous, given that she did not know the abilities of the opposition. However, if the enemy had the power to kill Shalltear and the Hanzos, the Dwarven Kingdom could not possibly have survived this long.

Well, provided that Dwarf Gondo was not especially weak.

After dispatching the Hanzos, Shalltear counted out three minutes. She had to do so because she had no means of communicating with the Hanzos.

Fortunately, the Quagoa seemed to have circled their wagons around the building, with no intentions of dispersing.

"Let's start. Begin as ordered; keep them from escaping into the surrounding area."

After giving orders to the undead she had brought along, Shalltear ran along the rooftops, and then leapt in front of the Quagoa. At the same time, her undead landed around them.

They had taken control of all the major thoroughfares around the building. The Quagoas' routes of retreat were almost completely cut off.

Shalltear sensed their confusion, and she cast a spell long before they could recover.

"[Mass Hold Species]."

As she had expected, they were not high-level opponents. Many of the Quagoa had stopped moving, frozen in place.

Those Quagoa who had not entered the spell's area of effect managed to recover from their confusion, but none of them attempted to attack Shalltear. She had appeared out of nowhere and used a spell they had never seen before to pin down their comrades. Even choosing between fighting or fleeing must have been very hard for them.

Shalltear smiled thinly.

It would seem the conclusion she had reached from observing them, that of centering the spell on an outstanding-looking Quagoa — for now known as the commander — had been a worthwhile one.

“[Mass Hold Species].”

She cast the same spell again, and now even the fleeing Quagoa were neutralized.

“Close in!”

In response to Shalltear’s shouted orders, the surrounding undead shrank their perimeter.

The Quagoa within the building heard Shalltear shout and sensed the abnormality in their comrades, but it was far too late for them.

As a sadistic grin grew on her face, Shalltear clapped her cheeks. She could not be careless. Her failure in the past was most likely because of that.

After recovering her composure, Shalltear stormed the building. While breaking through a window would have given her the element of surprise, she considered the effort of breaking through and decided on going straight through the door instead, using herself as bait.

The waiting Quagoa swiped their claws at Shalltear over and over again.

Three in front of me, four deeper within, nobody who looks like a commander. I should take their attacks and verify their strength.

Shalltear did not avoid their attacks, but bore the brunt of the Quagoa offensive.

As expected, she was unhurt.

Shalltear could only take damage from magical silver weapons. Some high-level monsters had natural attacks which counted as magic, while others had attacks which counted as silver, but those were very rare in low-level monsters.

While she might have expected this, the Quagoa were taken aback. As though unable to believe what they were seeing, the surrounding Quagoa clawed at her, but to no avail.

“Alright, the experiment’s over. Shall we end here? [Mass Hold Species].”

As the spell was cast, all the Quagoa present stopped moving.

“Now then, next up.”

Shalltear looked around and saw the Quagoa in the next room through the remains of a broken door. Their wide eyes held the emotion she most loved — fear.

As Shalltear’s stride brought her forward, the Quagoa clambered over themselves to flee.

However, they were too slow. To Shalltear, they were as slow as slugs. She resisted the impulse to give voice to mocking laughter, and instead cast her spell at their backs.

There would be no escape.

Shalltear would not tolerate any slipups.

Now that all the Quagoa within the building had been captured, she entered the tunnel and found six Quagoa by the feet of the Hanzos. Given the faint movements from their bodies, it would seem that they were still alive. Shalltear then asked the Hanzos:

“Now then, are these the Quagoa who tried to flee?”

“Yes. Nobody else managed to escape through here.”

Since Shalltear had not let anyone get away, one could consider her mission to have been perfectly accomplished.

“Just in case, go make sure there’s nobody else lying in wait within the building. After that, have the undead who are bringing them in carry these Quagoa out. You can tell the undead to bind them with ropes, right? I’ll wait here until you finish searching the interior and see if anyone else is trying to make a run for it.”

After receiving Shalltear’s orders, the Hanzos picked up the Quagoas on the ground and returned to the building. They returned to Shalltear after two minutes had passed.

Having flawlessly completed her task, Shalltear emerged from the building, where she saw many bound Quagoa and the forms of Ainz, Aura, the Hanzos, the Dwarf and Zenberu.

“Well done, Shalltear. It seems you accomplished your mission and didn’t let anyone escape.”

“Yes! Thank you very much, Ainz-sama!”

“Now then, Shalltear, I shall give you your next order. Interrogate these people, but do your best not to hurt them.”

“Understood.”

To begin with, she ordered the undead to drag out one of the Quagoa who had been captured with magic — in other words, one of the first captives.

“Hiiiiii! Save me!”

“Hehe, well, if you’re honest, I won’t kill you. *If* you’re honest. First things first, who’s the greatest of you people here?”

“Him, the one with the streaks of blue in his fur.”

“You son of a bitch! You sold me out!”

The one shouting back did seem to have a faint hint of blue in his pelt.

“Okay, okay, don’t fight. Then, can you bring him to me? Send this one back.”

They brought the highest-ranking Quagoa was brought before her.

“Hmph! You must be a friend of the Dwarves! I’ll never talk! I’ll stake the pride of my race on it!”

“Really now. All right, then. [Charm Species]. Done, can you answer my questions?”

“Ahh, of course! What do you want to know?”

The Quagoa behind him could not help but gasp at his earnestness.

Charm magic caused the target to regard the caster as a trusted friend or colleague. However, since friends would not tell friends to kill or hurt themselves, the targets would not obey orders which would result in such. Also, the term “friend” was also a bottleneck of sorts; there were secrets which people would keep even from their friends, so this magic would be ineffective at winkling out such information. If that were the case, more powerful mind control spells would be needed. However, such measures did not appear to be necessary this time round, a fact for which Shalltear thanked her luck.

“Firstly, are you really the greatest one here?”

“Ahhh, I was appointed the leader of this group. Oi, quiet down there, she’s a friend so it’s fine to tell her. Ah, could you keep that a secret?”

“Of course. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Ahhh, yes, we are, I’ll trust you, then. Still, those guys… Especially that guy, is he undead?”

The Quagoa stared at Shalltear’s glorious master. It annoyed her, but she had to bear with it to extract information from him.

“It’s all right. We’re friends so you’ll believe me, right?”

“Is he your minion?”

I’ll fucking kill you, Shalltear almost said. However, she swallowed those words. That was because her master spoke before she could.

“That’s right. She is my mistress.”

“Ho, that’s my friend for you, you’re amazing.”

“Th-thank you.”

Shalltear agonized over these complex feelings, which she could not put into words. Although she wanted to roll around on the floor, she could not waste the loving assistance which her Master had given her.

The Quagoa commander fell into deep thought, and the Quagoa behind him went, “What happened?” “What’s going on?” “Are we the only ones who don’t know that she’s a friend” and so on. However, the Quagoa commander ignored them, and a twisted look dawned on his face, which was probably a smile.

“I get it. Since you said so, I’ll believe you. After all, we’re comrades joined by a firm bond of friendship, aren’t we?”

Shalltear snorted.

“Then, could you speak loudly enough that the people behind me can hear? Who are you people? What are you doing in this city?”

Normally speaking, they should have been suspicious that a friend did not know this. However, this was the greatness of magic. The Quagoa commander replied without raising any doubts.

“We’re a detached force from the invasion force. We came here to kill the Dwarves which might have fled to this city.”

“Say what?!” the Dwarf exclaimed in shock. “What, what does that mean?”

“Shut up and keep quiet, Dwarf. Filthy races like yours should be exterminated.”

“Alright, alright, that’s about enough. You were saying something about an invasion force?”

“Ahhh, sorry, I seem to have gotten a little over-excited. There’s a Dwarven city north of here. The invasion force was raised to destroy that city. The problem is that the suspension bridge over the Great Rift is protected by a fortress, so our attacks have always been defeated. However, we’ve found a shortcut that bypasses the Rift and runs alongside the fortress, so we’re planning to use that to wipe them out in one fell swoop.”

Shalltear narrowed her eyes at the Dwarf. His expression looked ghastly. Apparently this was very bad news.

“When will the attack come?”

“We’re a detached force, we split off from the main body so we don’t know the exact time. But I think it should be today, or maybe tomorrow.”

Shalltear overheard the conversation between her master and the Dwarf.

“That said, will the city actually fall if the suspension bridge is taken?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve heard that since the enemy needs to use the bridge, they can only attack one spot. Thus, we can use the magic items within the fortress to repulse them. However, if the fortress is taken, the enemy will have a clear path to the city, and it’ll be hard to stop the advance of a large army. If that happens, we might have to abandon the city and escape to here, but if we’re ambushed here, the Dwarven race might be wiped out.”

The Quagoa commander chuckled deviously as he listened to their conversation.

“So are you the only detached group?”

“We’re the only ones who were sent here. We don’t know how strong the Dwarven city is or how many men we’ll need, so most of our troops are there.”

“Ain—eh, ah, then, then, is there anything you want to ask?”

I can’t say Ainz-sama, Shalltear fretted as she tried to piece her next words together.

“...There’s not much else. Strictly speaking, we only need to know how to communicate with their main body or something similar.”

After Shalltear repeated her Master’s question, the charmed commander babbled like a brook.

“Nope, our mission wasn’t seen as very important. In the end, our job was just to hunt down anyone who fled.”

Shalltear looked back to her Master, who nodded to her.

“How should we deal with them?”

“...Gondo, I’m sorry about this, but can you prepare to travel?”

The Lizardman and Dwarf understood the meaning behind those words, so they turned and left in silence. Ainz watched them leave, and gave Shalltear her next orders.

“...Then, let’s go. Shalltear, send them all back to Nazarick. They are to be observed. Whether they are to be killed or spared depends on the kind of relationship we forge with the Quagoa. Do not kill them until they are fully hostile to us. However, order some light experiments to be conducted. The hardness of their claws, the physical and magical resistance of their bodies, that sort of thing. Although, some of them might die as a result… Order them to minimize the number of deaths.”

“Understood.”

Shalltear immediately cast her [Gate], opening a portal to the surface of Nazarick.

“Come, you lot get in here.”

Led by the Quagoa commander, the others followed him in one after the other. Some of the Quagoa stood in place, frozen by fear, but Shalltear simply picked them up and chucked them through the [Gate].

After sending them all through, Shalltear briefly returned to Nazarick as well. She repeated her master’s orders to the Old Guarders standing by there, and then returned through the still-open [Gate].

Beyond it was Shalltear’s Master. His arms were crossed and he seemed to be waiting for her.

“Your collection of information was very thorough, Shalltear.”

The first thing he said was to praise her! Shalltear’s flat chest surged with heat.

“Yes!”

Shalltear reflexively got to her knees. That was the only appropriate position to take in response to her Master’s praise.

“—Mm, umu. I look forward to your loyal service in the future.”

“I understand, Ainz-sama!!”

“Don’t stay like that. Stand up. We’ll need to discuss things with Gondo. ...This is a chance to have them owe us a big favor.”

“How fortunate. Ainz-sama, your actions seem to be blessed.”

Their gazes met, and they smiled.

Granted, her Master’s face did not move, but Shalltear was absolutely certain that he was smiling.

“Then, let’s go.”

“Yes!”

Mmmm~ This is great! The two of us, walking side by side… Haaa, I’m so happy.

Shalltear left the building as she savored the taste of happiness.

“Gondo, sorry for the wait. What do you want to do now?”

“Would anything we do even make a difference… It takes about six days to travel underground to the city. It’s too far for us to bring that information back to the city.”

Shalltear’s slightly slack face tensed up, and as she exchanged glances with Aura, her Master and the Dwarf began their discussion. She strove to memorize it so she could record it into her memo pad.

Since he was her glorious Master, he probably intended to crush the Dwarf’s heart into utter submission. Either that, or he would fasten a heavy shackle around his neck and ensure that he would never betray him. Something like that.

“Is that so? Well, since you can’t make it there in time, what’s there to be done? If that’s the case, why not come to my country? You can’t do anything by yourself either, right?”

“Mmm… umu.”

“Although, I’d like to save the runesmiths… but even if we rushed there to help them, could we maintain an advantageous position during negotiations? Are the Dwarves a species that appreciates kindness shown to them?”

“Umu, I hope you can believe that. If you save the Dwarves from the threat of the Quagoa, I’m sure the negotiations will go well.”

“If that’s the case, then we’ll need to pick the right time to step in.”

After her Master made his experimental declaration, the Dwarf shrugged, as though to say he was alright with anything.

“I have already taken my lord’s… Your Majesty’s suggestion to heart.”

Shalltear had no idea what those words meant, but for some reason, she knew that the Dwarf had chosen her Master over his race.

Shalltear was both awed and frightened by the fact that her Master had managed to utterly dominate the soul of this Dwarf during the brief period in which he had entered the tunnel.

It must have been this charisma which enabled him to lead and coordinate the Supreme Beings.

“...No, I guess we ought to make haste. After all, we want to avoid the deaths of the runesmiths, and there’s no telling what will happen if we go underground, so we shall proceed from the outside. Can I trust you to guide us?”

“I’m not very confident, but I shall do my best.”

“Alright, then prepare to move out!”

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

INTERMISSION

He walked to the balcony, a glass of amber liquid in his hand.

The balcony was located on the tallest building in this city. From here, he could see the city which he ruled.

His people lived between the myriad pinpoints of light below.

He smirked as he took in the view, and pressed the glass to his lips.

The hot, smoky sensation spread through his body from his belly. The wind was quite comfortable. Now that he was in a good mood, he asked the weakling who knelt in his room a question:

"—So what?"

The weakling drew in a breath, but he had no interest in that. All he felt was displeasure in not receiving an immediate answer to his question. However, he was not angry enough to kill someone yet, so he did not make use of his might.

He was a merciful king.

Also, the scent of blood would linger. Even if he had someone clean it up, he would still feel annoyed for a while.

That being the case, the cleanest way to do it would be to push the weakling off from here. The most important thing was that the extreme circumstances of the fall might awaken the power of the weakling.

He wanted to say that it would be a good idea, but unfortunately, the weakling opened its mouth before he could do so.

“The Theocracy is building a field camp nearby. If this carries on, they will attack our Royal Capital in the coming years.”

“So what?”

“...If this goes on, we will all be destroyed. Please, I beseech your Majesty to use his might—”

“Worthless.”

He — the King — laughed it off.

“Why should I use my might on behalf of you weaklings?”

If he turned his head over his shoulder to look, he would see a citizen of his country kneeling there — a female Elf.

How stupid she looked.

She was so weak, with no special abilities, and thus utterly worthless.

Because of that, she could not understand how wonderful the Theocracy’s invasion was.

“...Don’t be stupid. Do you lack the will to muster up the strength to defend your own country? Or do you expect me to save you from any difficulty that crops up?”

“But, but, the Theocracy is very strong, and our strength alone…”

There was a distinct difference between the power of the Theocracy and that of his nation.

Be it in the amount of magic items, the skill of their troops, the resources they could allocate, their tactics — everything.

The only reason why the Elves could still hold the line in the face of the overwhelming power of the Theocracy was due to their guerilla tactics — the only field in which they surpassed the Theocracy — and the fact that the

Theocracy feared losing troops to the monsters of the Great Forest of Evasha. Thus, they had slowed their advance.

However, the Theocracy had recently committed the Holocaust Scripture — which had hitherto been assigned to the defense of their home nation — to the fray. They were experts in assassination, guerilla warfare, and counter-terrorism, and thus the Theocracy's advance had sped up immensely.

"...How surprising. Are you at your wits' end because you are all weaklings? This is truly a country of idiots. All the children that I sired turned out to be nothing but useless."

People born in wartime were stronger than those born in peace. That being the case, warfare was an opportunity to awaken the power latent in all living things. However, he had not heard about anyone whose power had awakened so far.

Still, he should not hold the people solely to blame. His many children had turned out that way as well. Their true number meant nothing to him so he paid it no heed; why would anyone bother counting pieces of garbage? It was probably because their mothers' blood was too strong. None of the offspring he had bred from them possessed even a fraction of his power.

"Get lost. You are loathsome in my sight. Better yet, train up the children you bore for me."

The woman bowed deeply, and left.

He finished the wine in a single gulp.

The children born of weaklings would only be weak. Thus, he needed strong mothers.

That was why he had sent the women to the frontlines during the Theocracy's invasion. This war might have allowed those weaklings to grow.

"And they fell short of my expectations."

However, nobody had become as strong as him. Or rather, they would only be born later.

"... Should I go all-out on the humans? I can breed with them, after all."

Humanoids and demihumans could not produce offspring, but matings between humanoids could bear fruit.

Suddenly he turned his gaze to the distance, and memories of the past surfaced.

"Well, she got pregnant in the end."

In the past, he had tricked the woman who had been known as the trump card of the Theocracy, and then he had captured her. He had chained her up and raped her, and even impregnated her. However, she had been stolen away by the Black Scripture before she could give birth.

He clicked his tongue.

That child was his. Since it had been born, they should give it back.

"...After this country falls, perhaps I'll go over to the Theocracy in person and take the child back."

This was not kindness of any sort.

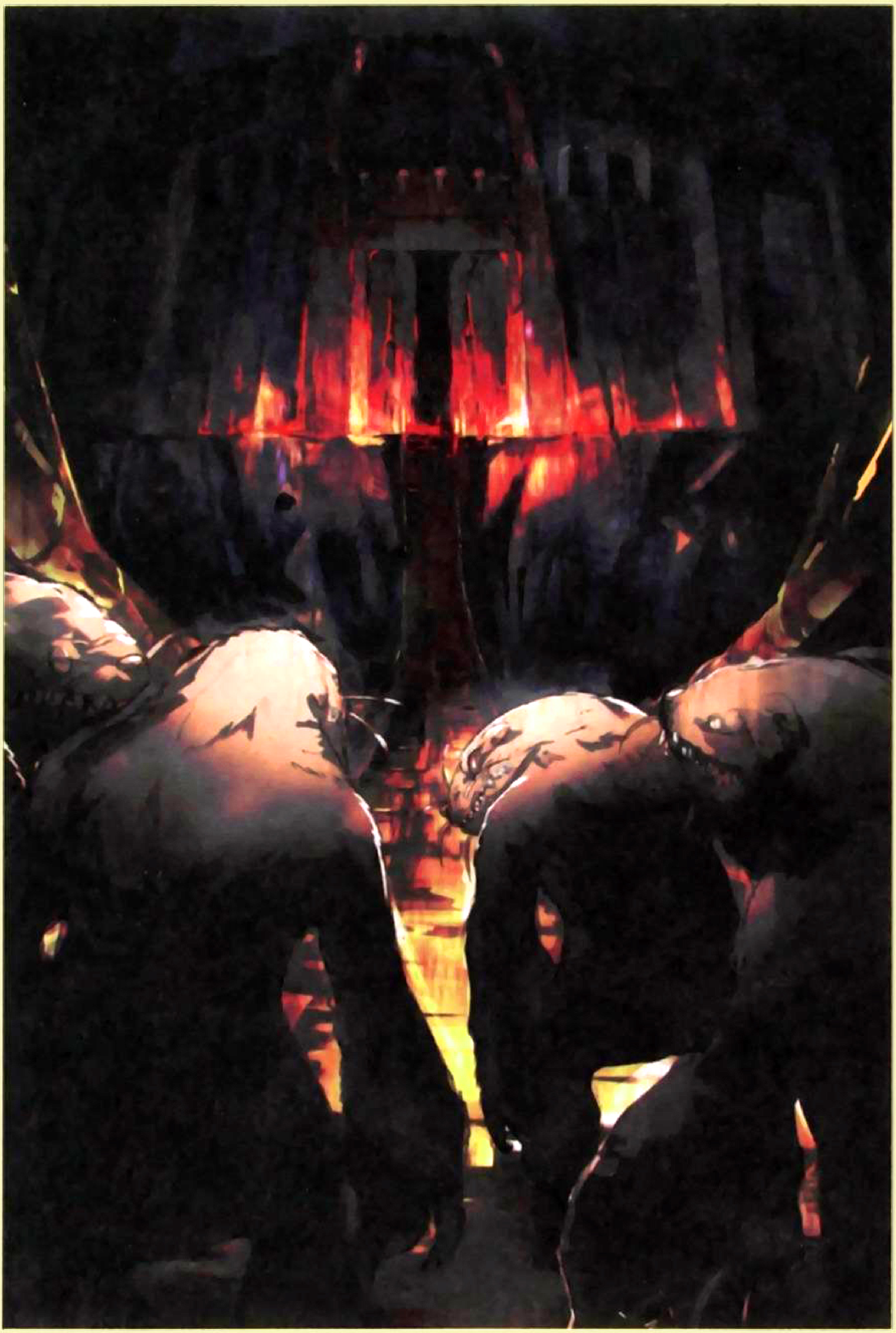
After all, that child was the get of himself and that powerful woman, so it had the potential to become even more powerful.

"—I do look forward to that."

Someday, he would use an army of his mighty children to encompass the world.

He walked back into the room, imagining the glorious future that would soon dawn. Facing him was a full-length mirror which reflected his image.

It was that of an Elf whose eyes had mismatched colours.



3章　迫りくる危機

Overlord Volume 11

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPENDING CRISIS

Part 1

The Great Rift.

It referred to the huge chasm that ran along the western side of the Dwarven Capital, Feoh Gēr.

It was a massive crevasse, over 60 km long and 120m across at its narrowest point. Its depth was unknown. Nobody knew what was waiting down there, and nobody had returned alive from the two expeditions that had been sent out to investigate it.

For the longest time, this natural barrier had protected Feoh Gēr from all manner of monstrous attacks. They could thwart any monsters from the west that tried to invade so long as they defended the suspension bridge which ran across the Great Rift.

Yet today, Feoh Gēr's garrison — the military base that stood between the Great Rift and Feoh Gēr — was in a whirl of shouts and confusion.

"What's going on? Someone tell me exactly what is going on!"

That cry came from the commander-in-chief of the Dwarven Army, a veteran of over 10 years of service.

The information coming in was garbled and contradictory, and nobody had any idea of what was happening. The only thing he could be certain about was that something had happened at the fortress which defended the Great Rift.

“The most recent information we have says that the Quagoa are attacking!” one of the platoon commanders said, repeating a report from the fortress.

News like that was hardly uncommon. The Quagoa and the Dwarves were mortal enemies, and they frequently attacked in groups of hundreds. There had been more attacks during the commander-in-chief’s ten years of service than he could remember, but until now all of them had been turned away at the fortress. None of them had managed to get close to the garrison, much less Feoh Gēr itself.

This was because the Quagoa were a race that was strong against weapon attacks, but very weak against electrical attacks. Knowing this, they had stocked the fortress with magic items that could produce [Lightning] and comparable effects.

[Lightning] was a spell that pierced the enemy in a straight line, and thus extremely effective against an enemy which lined itself up to attack a bridge. It could wipe out an entire wave of Quagoa in one shot, and on top of that, the Dwarves guarding that place were armed with crossbows enchanted with the ability to inflict additional electrical damage.

In contrast, the Dwarves in the garrison were inferior in both gear and numbers. However, it was not because they did not wish to allocate military power to an important base, but because the Dwarven Army had always lacked in manpower. Thus, the fortress had to draw its defenders from their meager pool of troops, and they had to do so in numbers which would not invite censure.

Despite all this specialization against Quagoa attacks, the fortress was now in a state where they did not even have the people left to call for aid. What did that mean?

“Don’t tell me they were attacked by too many enemies for them to fight off! Have there been any other messages from the fortress?”

“Nothing until now.”

Cold sweat poured down the commander-in-chief’s back.

The words “big invasion” appeared before his eyes. There had been rumors of such a thing several years ago, but even so, he had been trying his best to deceive himself, saying that there was no such thing. Yet, it was unfolding before his eyes.

The commander-in-chief pulled himself together. Now was not the time to contemplate such ghastly things.

What was the right thing to do now?

A gently-sloping tunnel in the shape of a spiral led from this garrison to the fortress, and ahead of them was the capital Feoh Gēr. The cavern where the garrison was located at was their final defensive line, and on top of that, they had gates of mithril which were alloyed with orichalcum. They could withstand an enemy attack from the tunnel if they closed the gates.

Should they close the gates?

If they did so, they would not be able to send out reinforcements from here. In other words, they would be abandoning their comrades, who might be fighting for their lives at the fortress.

Still, his hesitation only lasted for a moment.

There were less than 20 people in the fortress. There were over 100’000 Dwarves in Feoh Gēr. There could be only one answer when one thought of which side had priority.

“Close the gates!”

“Relay the orders! Close the gates!”

Before the echoes faded from the air, a thrumming sound came from the earth. Slowly, the gates covered the entrance. These gates, which had not been touched except during training, were now being used for their true purpose.

“Sir! It’s the Quagoa!”

“What?!”

After hearing the cry from the soldiers guarding the tunnel entrance, the commander-in-chief turned to look. He saw the disgusting form of a demihuman, foaming at the mouth, its eyes bloodshot.

Without lightning-enchanted weapons, even one of them was a formidable foe. And now, hordes of them, so many that they could not counted with both hands, were rushing at them.

How could this be? Had the fortress really fallen? How many men had the Quagoa brought with them? Could they hold against them even if they shut the gates?

The commander-in-chief had these and many other questions in his heart, but in the end he shook his head.

“Don’t let them in! Spearmen, forward!”

With great cries, the soldiers formed up into a spear line.

Even seeing this did not slow the speed of the Quagoa charge. This was because they trusted in their fur and hide to protect them against metal.

The commander-in-chief clicked his tongue. The Quagoa had made a wise choice. Their skin was such that crossbow bolts might bounce off when fired at them. The only thing a spear line could do was to hold them at bay. However, the people here had anticipated that the Quagoa would try something like this, and they had naturally taken steps against it.

“Mages! Blitzkrieg!”

A third-tier area-of-effect spell, [Thunderball] and two second-tier spells, [Thunderlances] came from the balcony overlooking the spearmen, at an angle which would not hit them.

The casters of these spells were the three most powerful mages in the army.

The group running at the head of the horde was instantly slain by the [Thunderball], as one would expect of the Quagoa's bane. The Quagoa behind them stopped to avoid being hit by it as well.

It was only for a short period, but it gave them breathing room.

The gates closed with a great *clang*. The sounds of hammering and banging filtered through from the other side of the sturdy doors.

The tense atmosphere in the air lightened somewhat. However, the commander-in-chief, the men around him, and everyone here knew that this was not over yet.

The gates were very tough. The teeth and claws of regular Quagoa would not be able to damage them. However, some Quagoa had teeth which were said to rival the hardness of mithril. While these were leader-level beings, it would not be unusual to find such entities participating in an attack like this. There was no way to rule out any problems.

"Dammit! If only the gate was electrified!"

That was a suggestion the commander-in-chief had made when he had first taken his position. After all, the gates alone were not reliable enough as a final line of defense. Of course, there had been various reasons for why they could not enchant the gates, such as a lack of national power, but a big part of that had been because the fortress had always managed to stop any enemy invasions. Thus, the higher-ups had the attitude that "as long as the fortress holds, everything will be fine".

Looking around, he saw grim and dark expressions on everyone's faces.

This was bad. If they lost their hope for the future, they would end up losing when the fighting became desperate.

The commander-in-chief decided to turn the situation around, and shouted:

"Well done! We've ensured the city's safety! But it's not guaranteed by any means! Start setting up barricades in case the enemy breaks through the gates! Hurry up!"

New determination filled the faces of the Dwarven soldiers. The knowledge that there was still something they could do rekindled their motivation. Even a fragile hope was better than none at all.

The commander-in-chief's chief of staff stood beside him and whispered into his ear.

“Sir, should we bury the gate with sand and dirt?”

The commander-in-chief pondered the other Dwarf's words.

If they sealed it off completely, many Dwarves would express their disapproval.

“They have no idea what's going on.”

The commander-in-chief noticed his chief of staff's expression. He had probably assumed the commander-in-chief's statement to be a reply to his question.

“Sorry, I didn't mean you. I meant that lot — the Regent Council.”

“You're one of them too, aren't you, commander-in-chief? So that's their response to a complete lockdown? Personally, I don't think sealing it off is enough. We should abandon Feoh Gēr.”

The commander-in-chief narrowed his eyes and dragged his chief of staff by the hand to a place where the men would not hear them.

He did not want their conversation to be overheard by anyone.

“You think so too?”

They had no idea how many Quagoa were on the other side of that gate.

The enemy attack had been too swift and they had been forced onto the back foot. Thus, they had lost many chances to learn about the enemy. What they were doing now was like locking themselves up and closing their eyes.

The only solid piece of data they had was that the enemy had enough fighting power to bring down the hitherto impregnable fortress, and they had to think of a way to deal with that.

Under these circumstances, and after taking their fighting power into consideration, it would be extremely difficult for the Dwarves to open the gates and beat back the enemy. The best solution might well be to abandon their capital.

“Then, how much time will burying it in dirt and soil buy us?”

“If we collapse the cavern, we’ll be able to buy a lot of time, but if we use sand and dirt alone, we’ll only gain a few days at most.”

“What dangers will a collapse pose?”

“As you know, we aren’t far from Feoh Gēr. Although I can’t really be sure without having the Tunnel Doctors check, there’s a chance that it might affect the city as well. The worst case scenario is that a shortcut opens up from beyond the gates and the Quagoa pour through it and into Feoh Gēr…”

“In other words, we need to find out right now. Then, next question. Do you think the fortress fell under sheer weight of numbers? Why didn’t the people in the fortress inform us sooner?”

“I thought of a few possibilities. Personally, the most likely option is that the Quagoa have enlisted the help of another species.”

“Could it be the Frost Dragons?”

The Quagoa had conquered the former Dwarven capital of Feoh Berkanan, and had taken it as their home. However, the Royal Palace at the heart of the city was ruled by a Frost Dragon.

Both parties did not have a perfectly cooperative relationship, but since they lived together, they might help each other out.

The commander-in-chief’s face blanched. Frost Dragons were essentially natural disasters once they reached a certain age.

There had originally been four Dwarven cities.

Feoh Berkanan, which had been abandoned during the attack of the Demon Gods 200 years ago.

Feoh Gēr of the east, which was their current capital.

Feoh Raiđō to the south, which had been abandoned several years ago.

And finally, Feoh Tiwaz, to the west.

This western city had been destroyed during a battle between two Frost Dragons — Olasird’arc=Haylilyal and Munuinia=Ilyslym, and it was little more than tumbled ruins.

“I feel that it’s very likely. While I don’t know what they did to induce that arrogant lot to take action, the other alternative is that they did it themselves; either they invented some kind of spell, or they found a route that bypassed the Great Rift.”

“Even we Dwarves haven't found a way around the Great Rift.”

“Still, how many years ago was that? Perhaps the Quagoa dug a tunnel or something as other monsters moved, or the earth’s crust shifted and gave them a detour. If you think about it, they might have gone above ground too.”

“The Quagoa on the surface?”

“There might be an individual with that ability.”

The Quagoa were completely blind under the sun, so it was impossible for the Quagoa to move their forces on the surface.

However, that was merely wishful thinking on his part.

No, it was too late to regret it now. He had to take that into consideration when planning future strategies.

“Chief of Staff, we need to consider that they might be able to travel aboveground and enhance our surface defenses accordingly. Send a few people over without compromising our defense here. We also need to get word to the Council and have them evacuate to the south.”

In addition to this garrison, the fortress in front of the Great Rift and the Council Chamber in the city itself, there was one more military base in the Dwarven city of Feoh Gēr.

It was a fortress erected for the benefit of those people taller than Dwarves — humans, for example — at the exit leading to the surface. The commander-in-chief gave the order to reinforce that area and stay alert for any surface attacks.

“Understood!”

“Also, have the men prepare to bury the door. If we need the Council’s permission, I’ll find a way to convince them.”

“What if the Council takes their time deliberating?”

“Do your best. I’ll do my best too.”

That was all he could say. Of course, his plan was to push for it as hard as possible, in his position as one of the eight councillors, but if the others vetoed him, then all he could do was try as hard as he could on his own.

“Report! Report! I have a report! Where’s the commander-in-chief?!”

Looking toward the source of that voice, the commander-in-chief saw a Dwarven soldier mounted on a Riding Lizard.

Riding Lizards were a kind of Giant Lizard. They were large reptiles that measured three meters from head to tail. They were not very numerous, so the Dwarves raised them as mounts and used them as pack beasts for day to day work.

However, most runners would not use them to relay a message. They were only employed in dire circumstances — when they needed to let the garrison know about the conditions on the frontline.

Unease filled the heart of the commander-in-chief.

“Where’s that man from?”

“He should have been posted to the fortress at the surface entrance this week.”

That validated the feeling of dread in the commander-in-chief’s heart. No, given the man’s expression and his near-crazed tone, it was plainly obvious. Asking that much was simply because he did not want to acknowledge the reality before his eyes.

“I’m here! What is it?”

The messenger ran towards the commander-in-chief at full speed. It could not be delayed. This was something which had to be heard immediately so a course of action could be quickly determined.

The messenger fell off the Lizard’s back, and shouted as he desperately tried to right himself.

“Commander-in-chief! There’s an emergency! Mon-monsters! There’s monsters!”

He had expected it to be about Quagoa, but he quickly ruled that out. The man would not have used those words to describe Quagoa.

“Calm down! We can’t figure out what you’re saying! What happened? Is everyone else alright?”

“Y-yes! There’s scary monsters at the entrance! They say they want to talk about the Quagoa army headed this way!”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

Their timing was too perfect. He could not imagine that the two events were unconnected. Could they be the bosses of the Quagoa, or the ones who helped them cross the Great Rift?

“Who, who are they? What do they look like! Chief of Staff! Gather every man who can move right now!”

“Understood!”

The commander-in-chief did not even have the time to watch his panicked subordinate leave.

“How many of those monsters are there?! What are your losses?!”

“Y-yes! There’s about 30 of them. But they don’t seem to want to fight! They even said they wanted to make a deal with us, but they looked very evil, so I don’t think that was their real intention. There must be some sort of scheme at work!”

How exactly did they qualify as evil? More importantly, this man had not described them yet. After being questioned again, the soldier gulped and explained,

“They’re fearsome-looking undead surrounded by an inauspicious-looking aura!”

“What?! The undead?!”

Beings who hated the living, who sowed death in their wake, the enemies of everything that lived.

Several images appeared in the commander-in-chief’s mind as he heard the word “undead”. For instance, Freezing Zombies, Frost Bones, and the like. However, none of those undead were powerful adversaries. This man should have known that. In that case, why was he so afraid?

Besides, why had the undead come here? Were they here to delight in the mutual massacre of the Dwarves and Quagoa, both of which were living beings?

“Chief of Staff, are you ready yet?! Move out once you’re done! We don’t know what kind of undead are out there, but do not take them lightly! Don’t let them underestimate us! They may not be acting haughtily, but if they look down on us, we’ll be in danger!!”

Part 2

The group advanced, with Gondo in the lead.

Since Gondo usually travelled underground, he was not very familiar with the surface. Therefore, he had to rely on his sense of direction over the terrain when it came to moving forward. Initially, Ainz was worried about this. But after seeing Gondo advance without hesitation, he began to trust the man. Now, he had wholly entrusted the task of guidance to him.

The fact was that Gondo had no reason to deliberately lead Ainz astray now that the Quagoa were attacking the Dwarven capital. That being the case, there should be no problem having him lead the way.

Under Gondo’s leadership, Aura’s magical beasts moved across the snow like it was a grassy plain.

They boasted high dexterity and great stamina, as expected of high-level magical beasts. Even in the thin air of the snowy mountains and bearing Ainz and the others on their backs, their speed did not decrease one bit. They headed north at speeds of over 100 km per hour.

They had spotted several flying monsters during their journey, but a few threatening growls from the magical beasts scared them all away. Thanks to that, their travel time was cut to a minimum.

In less than a day, they had reached the sole remaining Dwarven city, Feoh Gēr.

Ainz guided his beast over to Gondo and asked him a question.

“...Well then, Gondo. The southern city of Feoh Raiđō was accessed through a fissure in a cave. Is Feoh Gēr like that as well?”

If that was the case, they would need to search for a way in. Gondo — who had initially been frightened by his magical beast, but was now used to riding it — replied:

“Umu. Most cities where Dwarves live are like that. However, Feoh Gēr was designed with considerations for large-scale trade with humans, so it’s slightly different from Feoh Raiđō. Firstly, it’s easy for humans to find, and in order to minimize any discomfort for visitors, they built a huge fortress on the outside. You’ll know it when you see it.”

Ainz looked around after hearing that, but he still could not find any trace of a structure.

“You won’t see it if you don’t head further northeast.”

Gondo’s words were full of confidence. It would seem he was quite certain of where their destination was. Since he was the only one who could lead them, there was nothing Ainz could do if he was wrong, so all he could do was trust him.

While saying “Is that so,” Ainz cast his [Message] spell.

The captured Quagoa had been taken to Nazarick. There, they had been questioned, and their knowledge used to supplement Gondo’s report.

The Quagoa were a race that submitted to the strong, but the Quagoa of the Azellisian Mountain Range were divided into eight clans, all of whom were united under the Clan Lord. They numbered 80’000 in total.

After analyzing this information, Ainz stamped them as a race which held no charm for him.

If he had to choose between helping the Dwarves or the Quagoa, Ainz would choose the former without hesitation.

However, he learned that the metals which the Quagoa ate when they were young determined their strength when they matured. If he let them eat the metals of Nazarick, it could give rise to a powerful individual.

Then, he thought about the prismatic ores in the Dwarven Kingdom.

Even if he had not eaten one of the prismatic ores, perhaps this Clan Lord had reached his station by eating one of the rare metals of YGGDRASIL.

If he was strong enough to capture, then it was worth investigating him.

I should consider taking them in if they can obey the Sorcerous Kingdom, even though I'm not confident about feeding 80'000 people. After all, that's the sort of country I want.

The country Ainz wanted.

It was a nation where many races lived in harmony under his rule. It was a nation which reproduced the image one had of the guild Ainz Ooal Gown.

It was a nation where his friends, wherever they were, could live and smile.

That being the case, he ought to show these Quagoa some mercy.

Still, if they swear their loyalty to me, where should I put them? This mountain is a little sparse… what about the mountain range to the south of E-Rantel? But there might be residents there too… Umu, what a pain. The Lizardmen have the same technology level as them. Perhaps my experience in ruling them could be put to use. It might be a good idea to let Cocytus handle them.

After thinking this far, Ainz considered the opposite side of the coin.

What if they don't bend the knee? Shall I rule them by force? Shall I exterminate them? Or should I kill all the adults and use the children for experiments? Is forcing them into one clan and then ruling over them the best way?

As he considered various matters, Gondo's shout interrupted Ainz's train of thought.

“Over there!”

Ainz looked where Gondo was pointing, and sure enough, there was something which looked like a fortress built up against the side of the mountain.

The group headed straight for it. While there were many ways to conceal themselves, there was no point in doing so, and thus they proceeded directly and openly.

As they closed the distance to the fortress, the defenders at the fortress spotted them, and the sentries came to life.

Much like what he would do before a sales pitch, Ainz inspected his clothing, and made sure his robe was neat and tidy. Of course, it was a magic item and could not get torn or wrinkled, but his memories as Suzuki Satoru told him that he should check anyway.

After they approached the fortress, the Dwarves cocked their crossbows and took aim from the windows.

The only people who might be lethally wounded by the bolts were Gondo and Zenberu.

While he had thought of sending them to negotiate to prove that they had no hostile intentions, they might end up being shot by bolts if things went wrong, so he abandoned that idea. Instead, Ainz would proceed first, while Gondo and Zenberu would show up later.

He halted his beast outside the effective range of their crossbows and then dismounted. Because he was still within the maximum range of the crossbows, he ordered Shalltear and Aura to stand by and protect Gondo and Zenberu.

After that, all that remained was anti-player strategies.

If there were any players, they would immediately take a defensive stance and fall back. While he could not confirm the presence or absence of players during his talks with Gondo on the road, it was more likely that they did not exist. However, if he was careless, he might end up losing the NPCs (the children) and Ainz did not want to experience that a second time.

All the Dwarves watching him from the window had the same frozen expression on their faces. Thanks to their messy beards, he could not differentiate one individual Dwarf from another, but how should he put this — they looked comical.

Suppressing the urge to laugh, Ainz stepped forward, faking an air of calm.

His hands were raised, to show that he had no hostile intent.

As he drew closer to the fortress—

“Hold it right there!”

—A warning cry rang out. It sounded like its owner was having a seizure. Granted, he was undead, but Ainz could not help sighing internally as he mused, *this is a pretty bad reception for someone who’s showing no signs of hostility.*

“Why have you come here, undead!”

Ainz stroked his shiny cheekbones.

“I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and I have come to forge a friendly relationship with the Dwarven nation. We will not attack you if you do not attack us, so please lower your weapons.”

Confusion appeared in the eyes of the Dwarves watching from the windows. Ainz took this chance to continue speaking:

“After capturing the Quagoa who invaded Feoh Raiđō, I learned of their plans to attack this place. If you have no faith in your strength of arms, then I — my Kingdom — will gladly render assistance. Yes, that’s right — it will be a good show of friendship.”

He smiled, but because he had no skin, the benevolence of his gesture did not carry over to the opposite side.

"What about that Dwarf behind you? Is he a hostage?!"

It would seem the Dwarves were still wary of him.

"How rude. I *am* a king, you know? Is that any way to talk to a king?"

The Dwarves looked at each other, and then one of them responded.

"No, no… hang on, show us some proof that you're really a king!"

"—-I see. That does make sense," Ainz agreed. "Then, allow me to introduce him. He is one of you, Gondo the smith, whom I met in Feoh Raiđō."

Ainz showed off the kingly movements he had been taking great pains to practice.

With the air of a natural-born leader, he gestured to his subordinate to step forward.

A deep sense of satisfaction filled Ainz as he heard the stifled gasps of awe coming from the Dwarves. It would seem his long hours of practice had not gone to waste.

Now that Gondo was here, Ainz — who was in a good mood — showed off another pose of a gracious king and yielded the floor to him.

"Sorry, but can you enter the fortress and explain the situation to them in detail?"

"Umu, leave it to me."

Gondo advanced to the fortress gates and requested permission to enter, but the gates did not open.

"...What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe something happened?"

“... Is, is that really him?! Is that really Gondo the Weirdo? Maybe someone used magic to take his face!”

Ainz frowned as he heard the Dwarves’ voices. Staying alert was very important, and even Ainz approved of it. Still, they would not be able to make any progress if nobody trusted them.

However, he had heard something about the possibility of meeting an acquaintance here. If that was the case, they would be very fortunate.

“I say, Gondo, can you prove yourself to them by showing your knowledge of this city? Like say, where you live, something that only a person who lived in this city would know?”

“Oh, ohhh, yes… I’ll tell that guy’s wife his secret. Ah, there’s a restaurant called the Black Gold Beard Pavilion! It’s run by a guy whose face looks like an anvil. His food tastes terrible, and the only decent thing there is the stew!”

The Dwarves fell silent. Ainz looked at Gondo, somewhat lost for words. His reply seemed like he was trying too hard.

“Idiot! That place isn’t for eating, but for drinking! Their stout tastes best!”

“Liar! It’s the red mushroom beer that’s the most delicious!”

“What are you saying, their cloudy wine is the best! Just imagine that bubbly fragrance!”
(TL Note: 濁り酒 - nigorizake)

“None of you know what real beer tastes like! Bearded Lady’s the best!”

Ainz made a mental note that the Dwarves liked their beer a lot, and then replied to them:

“How about it? Can you accept that this is the real Gondo? Speaking of which, all we wanted to do was inform you that the Quagoa are trying to circle around the Great Rift and attack this city. All you have to do is send our warning to the people at the top. This way, our country will have discharged its duty, even if the Quagoa attack is a fierce one. It would be quite upsetting if you chastised us afterwards."

Several Dwarves pulled their heads back from the windows.

Some time passed. It would seem several people were having a discussion.

"Wait there! We'll send a report to our commander-in-chief!"

According to Gondo, that person was the highest appointment holder in this country's military.

It would seem they realised that this had to go to their highest authority.

"Kukuku~"

Ainz did not suppress his chuckling.

There was a clattering noise, and when Ainz glanced towards its source, he saw that Dwarves had trained their crossbows on him once more. Their breathing was ragged; they seemed to be in the grip of powerful emotions.

Crap. Are they angry because I laughed?

"Forgive me. In any event, is it all right if only Gondo enters? He's proven his origins, hasn't he?"

"No, he can't, no, it's not allowed, stay there! Wait there!"

He had not been laughing at them, but it would seem he had upset them all the same.

Ainz's strong emotions were suppressed, but small emotional ripples could sneak by.

How would a company react if a salesman whom they had never met before before smiled at them as though he had something to hide? Ainz was annoyed at himself for not thinking about that. It had resulted in a mistake.

I should be more careful, Ainz thought as he backed away together with Gondo.

And so they stood there for some time.

When Jircniv came to visit, I provided refreshments, furniture and made all sorts of preparations to welcome them. Don't the Dwarves do things like that? ...No, the circumstances now are different from back then.

In contrast to Jircniv's prearranged visit, Ainz was essentially a cold-calling door-to-door salesman. He should be grateful that they had not chased him away on the spot.

In addition, he would not be able to enjoy any drinks they gave him, considering his body.

Still, we did give the Dwarves very valuable information. I was hoping for an appropriate response. Well, I can use that as fodder for negotiation during official diplomatic relations. I'll bear with it for now.

Still, it would probably be better to change and avoid giving offense.

First, he took out a fake Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown. It was a perfect cosmetic copy, down to the metal used in its construction. However, that was all; it did not possess even a tenth of the power of the original, and it was merely socketed with jewels that had the same color as the original.

Ainz imbued the staff with a red glow, which quickly darkened. Why did it have such an adjustment function? His past companions' obsession filled him with irritation.

It did not seem to be linked to his own aura.

Ainz radiated a black halo from behind him, but as expected, the staff's aura did not change.

Is it just a visual effect?

There was a sudden clatter, which snapped Ainz out of his thoughts. When he turned to look at the source of the sound, he saw three Dwarves seated on the ground.

They looked like the Dwarves manning the fortress, but at the same time they seemed more impressive. In truth, two of them were better-dressed than the other. That one must have been a soldier in this fortress, and the other two would probably be his superiors.

...Why are the three of them sitting there? Is sitting down to talk the proper etiquette amongst Dwarves? ...They're staring at me with eyes wide open. It would be annoying if it's a Dwarf-only expression.

Their mouths were hidden by their beards, so it was difficult to see the looks they had on their faces.

Baffled, Ainz nevertheless extended a hand to the seated Dwarfs.

One could take that as the intention to help them up, or that he wanted to shake hands. But in truth, he wanted to tell them that he would rather talk while standing.

It was hard adjusting to different cultures. If he handled this poorly, the other side might take offense.

If they attacked him with something like, *"You should have done some research on our country's customs since you wanted to form a relationship with us"*, he would have nothing to say in response.

Though he was very uneasy about this, Ainz gave thanks to his unmoving face, and kept his hand extended.

The Dwarves glanced back and forth between Ainz's face and hands, a troubled look on their faces.

Hm? Could it be that they're afraid of me?! ...Well, given that I look like this… it can't be helped, right? Reactions like this are kind of expected from humanoid society...

Although they feared him in E-Rantel as well, they had not reacted in this way. Therefore, it might be that taking the hand of a highly-placed person was impolite in their society.

In the end, the worried Ainz decided to pull them up by the hand.

Since they have the time to waste on this pointless business, it should mean that the Quagoa haven't attacked yet. If they did attack, we could have them owe us a big one, but just warning them about it would count as a small favor, so I should bear with it. Ahhh, what a shame. Still, which one of them is their leader?

"Well then, I am the Sorcerer-King Ainz Ooal Gown. Are you the gentlemen who are in charge of welcoming me?"

He did not know which of the higher-ups was of higher rank, so he addressed the space between them. Then one of the Dwarves nodded forcefully, like he was trying to shake something off his face.

"Ahem! I, I am the man in charge of the military—"

"The military— I see."

So this was the commander-in-chief. Ainz was surprised. He had not expected their top man to come down in person.

Could it be that this country has heard of the Sorcerous Kingdom before? Or rather… was it because I brought them news at a very opportune time?

"—Are there any problems with the Quagoa? I do apologize for making you come down in person during a busy time, commander-in-chief."

The commander-in-chief's eyes went wide.

"I see… so you already know why I came, then?"

What the hell is he talking about, Ainz thought. Naturally, he did not actually say it.

"—Of course. That is correct."

He nodded magnanimously, in the regal manner he had practiced many times before.

"...I see. ...Well, as you know, we've somehow halted the Quagoa advance for now — no, we're trying to hold them back."

"Ho. Hoho. ...And?"

Ainz wanted to ask the Dwarf what he thought Ainz knew, but since Ainz had already pretended that he was well-informed, that line of questioning was ruled out.

But has anything leaked out about me?

All he could do was hang on to that thought as he looked forward to their response.

"Before that, I heard from my men that you obtained your information after questioning some Quagoa captured in Feoh Raiđō. Do you have any evidence to support it?"

"There is Gondo, a citizen of this country—"

"—*Material* evidence."

"Hm, so, you want to see the captured Quagoa, then? I can bring forth several of them and you can ask them yourselves."

"An immediate answer… It seems I will have to be frank with you, then. ...At this rate, an evacuation to Feoh Raiđō will be very difficult."

"Commander…!"

Judging by the reproachful tone taken by the man beside the commander-in-chief, Ainz guessed that the man was harping on the fact that the commander-in-chief was talking about military secrets in front of Ainz. However the commander-in-chief calmly continued:

“His Majesty already knows everything. It is as he said — the fact that someone who should be commanding at the frontlines is here is a clear sign of a stalemate. Since he already knows that, it should also be easy to imagine what our troops — who cannot look forward to any reinforcements — intend to do.”

No, I was just asking to be polite. However, Ainz could not speak the truth, and instead he nodded, in the practiced manner of a true ruler.

The commander-in-chief described the terrible state they were in.

The fortress defending the Great Rift had fallen, and they had been pushed back to their final defensive line. Only one gate stood between them and the enemy, and if it fell, the foe would pour into the city and many Dwarves would die. While they had originally planned to buy some time for people to flee to Feoh Raiđō, it was clear that the survival of the entire species would be in doubt if the plan was not radically altered.

After Ainz learned of the Dwarves’ dire straits, he smiled in his heart. Everything was developing in a favorable direction for him.

“How about this? I will lend you the use of my forces to beat back the Quagoa for the time being. What do you think?”

The commander narrowed his eyes, as though to hide the emotion within them.

“Can you do that? But…”

Traditionally speaking, one would need to put down the terms of a deal in writing before a contract could be signed. There were many advantages in handling matters in that way. However, if he freely lent them his strength, he would earn the gratitude of everyone present. One could make gains with a loan that one could not with a written agreement, and Ainz was gunning for that.

Between the fixed and the formless, the formless was generally more troublesome. It was like paying for a meal at a restaurant based on one’s mood. There was the chance that one would be overcharged compared to paying a fixed price.

Generosity is often similar to greed, hm? Did Punitto Moe-san say that?

“After coming all this way and taking so much effort to find you, it would be quite troublesome for me if the country I wished to befriend was destroyed. Won’t you accept my help?”

“...But if we don’t have the approval of the Council…”

“Well, as long as there’s enough time, it should be alright. This is simply an offer of assistance from me. The final decision is yours. Of course, the Council should settle important things in session… but you should know how this sort of thing usually ends up. Meetings go on from dawn to dusk and in the end nobody can come to a conclusion. While it would be a shame to let my journey up to now go to waste, it can’t be helped.”

“...Your Majesty, are you confident in your ability to repulse the Quagoa?”

“If they are only of the calibre that we saw in Feoh Raiđō, then it should be child’s play.”

Mm, Gondo nodded from the side.

“Of course, that is before the Quagoa break into the city. It is very difficult to eliminate only the enemy during a chaotic melee. I trust you wouldn’t want to stand by and let the fighting spill over into the Dwarven city? So I think that right now, your one little door is your last chance, right?”

A bitter expression came over the commander-in-chief’s face—

“—How much longer do you have? How many more days can the gate hold out?”

Ainz’s repeated hammering on the point seemed to have made up the commander-in-chief’s mind for him.

“...I understand. Your Majesty, I pray you will lend us your nation’s strength.”

“Commander-in-chief!”

Another soldier called out in a panicked voice, and the commander-in-chief glared sharply at him.

Then, the commander-in-chief apologized briefly to Ainz before taking the other man some distance away, so he could not hear.

Then, they talked.

He could hear fragments of conversation, like “this is bad”, “un—”, “Quagoa”, “we still”, “danger before us”, “in any case” and so on.

The general idea seemed to be that it would be hard for them to deal with the Quagoa on their own, so they should take advantage of this opportunity and gamble on it.

It would seem the time had come for one last push.

Infusing strength into his voice, Ainz called out:

“Don’t you think it’s about time to decide your future plans now?”

Part 3

There were eight clans of Quagoa living in the Azellisia Mountain Range.

They were the Pu Rimidol clan, the Pu Randel clan, the Pu Surix clan, the Po Ram clan, the Po Shyunem clan, the Po Gusua clan, the Zu Aygen clan and the Zu Riyushuk clan.

The children of Pu — the hero of old — formed three clans that took his name, and they feuded with the clans which named themselves Po and Zu. There were slight differences between each individual clan, but on the whole each was composed of 10’000 Quagoa, for a total of 80’000 Quagoa distributed throughout the Azellisia Mountain Range.

Now, if someone wanted to know if the Quagoa people were strong, the answer was that they were not.

Even if one clan had 10’000 members, the Quagoa had little in the way of technology or civilization, and ranked among the lesser races of the mountains. They were little more than prey for the strong.

Now, if one asked who the greatest enemy of the Quagoa race was, the answer would be the fellow clans of their race. No, sometimes even the people of their own clans could become their enemies. Other monsters viewed the Quagoa as little more than food. They did not hate the Quagoa, nor did they compete with them. However, their fellow Quagoa thought differently.

That was due to the way in which the Quagoa grew.

The ores and rocks which the Quagoa ate at a young age determined their abilities later in life. In other words, they had to compete with their own people for rare ores and metals to strengthen their bloodline. Thus, their fellow clans were their enemies, but it was only natural that the nearby foe was more troublesome than a distant one.

Similarly, the Dwarves who contended with them for ores were also their enemies, but it was more likely that the dwarves would chase them away with their lightning-enchanted weapons.

However, at some point, a hero of legends — one who surpassed Pu, the hero of old — was born.

He was the Lord of the Clans, Pe Riyuro.

His might far surpassed that of the Blue and Red Quagoa. His overwhelming power allowed him to unite the clans.

Riyuro's revolution did not stop there.

After discovering an abandoned dwarven city, he gathered the clans there and formed monster-fighting units, using Dwarven prisoners to develop agriculture and animal husbandry.

That was not all. Usually, when a new clan leader was born, he would exterminate the bloodline of the previous clan leader. This was the commonly-accepted means by which power was exchanged within the Quagoa people. However, Riyuro did not do that. Instead, he chose to let the leaders of the various clans rule themselves. However, Riyuro ordered all the ores to be brought to him. Those who obeyed Riyuro and performed well would be given rare ores, regardless of their status.

For instance, those clans that defeated monster invasions would be known as brave, while those clans that found more gold or precious stones would gain favor and more members. He would reward them for their work with the appropriate ores.

Their competition against their lord turned into competition with each other, and the Lord's seat was secure.

He had done all these things which no Quagoa had even dreamed of to expand his influence and to set into motion a certain plan.

That plan was to attack the Dwarven city.

The clans gathered their best warriors in response to their Lord's summons. They sent 2'000 people per clan, for a total fighting strength of 16'000.

This was an army never before seen in history. However, even with that much manpower, a direct attack across the suspension bridge would lead to horrendous casualties. Not only would that defeat the purpose of gathering such numbers, but it ran the risk of being defeated without being able to bring down the fortress.

Thus, Riyuro ordered them to find a way around the fortress.

Although several of the scouting teams did not come back, they managed to find a route to bypass the Great Rift in the end. After that, his troops divided themselves up into three to carry out their tasks.

One group was assigned to find and capture fleeing Dwarves. This task was divided among many smaller squads.

One group was designated as the main force. They were to conquer and loot the Dwarven city. If the elite group took too long in bringing down the fortress, they would step in to help.

The last group was filled with elite Quagoa, who would bring down the Dwarven fortress. This group would move ahead of the main force, bring down the fortress and they might be used to conquer the city as well.

The third group, the vanguard, was led by a Quagoa called Yozu.

He was one of Riyuro's top men, an exceptional Red Quagoa. His mind was sharp, he was a capable fighter, and he was one of the top candidates for the spot of leader within his own clan.

Even so, it was not easy for someone like him to command his mixed battle group.

After all, the elites from the various clans held deep-seated grudges against each other. However, Yozu could even managed to make use of that.

By fanning the flames of competition between the clans, he brought down the fortress.

Their victory was assured by taking the flanking route and then the fortress, but even then, nobody could doubt his extraordinary command ability.

In truth, nobody else among the Quagoa could match his skill as a commander.

And now, the Quagoa were preparing to checkmate the Dwarves.

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The first Quagoa among the vanguard who attacked the fortress were assault troops composed of the best of the best. These Quagoa clawed savagely at the hateful gate, but they could not break through.

One more step. Just one step closer, and they could break through that door and trample their hated enemies, the Dwarves. One more step, and they could take this entire domain for their own. They would be ranked first for their achievements, and as their reward, they would receive enough ore to make their heads spin.

However, that chance was denied and sealed away by the cold gate before them.

The Quagoa had a saying; the worm that hides deeper grows bigger.

One of the Quagoa was so angry at being so close but so far that he tried biting the gate. Naturally, he did nothing more than scratch the surface.

Seeing him, several others tried the same thing.

However, regular Quagoa could not harm it at all. They could try for a hundred years and still get nowhere.

Even when they thought to burrow through the rock and bypass the gate, they found that the walls were reinforced by lattices of the same metal which made up the gate.

Regular Quagoa could not breach that gate. Their rare elites like the Blue or Red Quagoa were held in reserve as a secret weapon and not assigned to those assault teams. In other words, their advance was briefly halted here.

Anyone would be frustrated by being denied their glory at their very last moment. However, they were not anxious. This was because they had already reported this to the vanguard commander. If the great Yozu was here, he would surely think of a way that they could not.

Even so, they formed up in clans to rest, because they did not know how much time it would take.

If they were regular troops, they might fidget and wander from stress, or start fighting with other clans. However, everyone here was the best of the best. They rested when it was time to rest, saving their rage and strength for the next battle.

And then, after resting for some time, the Quagoa suddenly looked up, as though their heads were mounted on springs.

There was a low bass creaking that sounded like it came from deep beneath the earth, and the gates began to slowly open.

The assault Quagoa looked at each other.

The Dwarves had sealed the gates in a panic. Why had they opened them again? Did they want to surrender? There were many Quagoa who thought that way, and they laughed mockingly as they bared their teeth.

As if they would accept a surrender.

Their plan was to exterminate the Dwarves. They would not give the Dwarves the time to spout useless words.

They would flood in like an avalanche through the opened gates and brutally slaughter all the Dwarves in their way. After that, they would trample the city underfoot and massacre with all their strength.

A gap slowly opened before the bloodthirsty Quagoa. It was still too small to fit through. One of the murderous Quagoa worked his arm into that gap.

He ventured his sharp claws forth, trying to murder any Dwarves in front of the Gate.

And then—

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

The Quagoa who wanted to be number one screamed and rolled back. The arm he thrust in was gone, replaced by a fountain of fresh blood.

Their shock at this development was like dumping cold water on the fires of their bloodlust.

It was easy to imagine what had happened.

In all likelihood, someone had cut his arm off with some kind of weapon, but was that even possible?

The Quagoa special ability was that they were extremely resistant to the weapons which the Dwarves typically used. During their surprise attack on the fortress, some of them had been hurt but none of them had died. That should have held true as long as they were not hit by electrical attacks.

But then, why had their comrade’s arm been chopped off?

There was only one reason for that.

That would be the existence of an extraordinary swordsman, who could easily cut through the arm of a Quagoa, a member of a race whose skin and hide repelled all blades.

In other words, there was an unimaginably powerful warrior behind the slowly-opening door.

The Quagoa stepped back, gripped by an emotion they had not yet felt in this battle — fear. During this time, the gap in the door continued to widen.

“Why are you backing down?” called a powerful voice from the rear of the assault team.

“There are no cowards among Clan Pu Rimidol!”

“Ohhhhh!”

That cry of agreement must have come from the members of Clan Pu Rimidol who had been chosen for this assault team. Panicked, those from the other clans shouted as well, proclaiming their strength.

“Clan Po Gusua knows no cowards either!”

“Nobody from the Zu Aygen Clan will lose to the Pu or the Po! How can we let our ancestors laugh at us from the Land of Derey?!”

To the Quagoa, the valorous dead would watch their children prosper from the Land of Derey. It was said that the ancestors would mock those who shamed themselves.

Those words were the trigger that reignited the fighting spirit of the Quagoa.

They dragged the disarmed Quagoa aside, to the wall. The assault teams kept their distance and took a close formation, ready to slaughter this mighty swordsman.

“Charge! No matter how strong he is, the enemy only has one sword! We’ll hit him with more people than he can handle,” someone said.

“No, we just need to rush straight ahead once the door opens. Once we knock him down, we’ll trample him. Then we’ll sack the city.”

“Then, let me take the lead!”

There was a mineral called Nuran which was crushed into powder and mixed into paint. The courageous would take this paint and draw two stripes through their fur as proof of their bravery.

The Quagoa gathered behind one such brave soul. If he was struck down by that sword, they could still shove him in.

The gap in the door was now big enough for a single Quagoa to pass through. While it was too cramped to burst through, they would be losing men for nothing if they hit the entrance with the lightning magic from just now and then closed the doors again.

“Charge!”

With a valorous cry, over 10 Quagoa made their move.

The brave Quagoa at their head stiffened. The people pushing him from behind felt him being killed by the swordsman. However, they could not stop. If they stopped now, they would be insulting his courage.

Because of that, the Quagoa from behind pushed forward with single-minded intensity, intent on letting their momentum carry them into the Dwarven city to loot and pillage it...

—And then they stopped.

No matter how hard they pushed, they could not carry on. It was as though a thick, massive wall was blocking them.

One of the Quagoa raised his head and looked forward.

It was only natural to wonder if the Dwarves had made a wall.

Because indeed, there was a jet-black wall there.

All their eyes could see was the wall. And then it started moving.

“OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

It was a mighty cry that made the air quiver.

What they had thought was a wall was in actual fact a gigantic shield.

The Quagoa had no history of weapon or armor use, but they had seen the Dwarves use them before. However, they had never seen anything this big. Before them was a shield that could have been mistaken for a wall.

As the Quagoa were baffled by this development, the loathsome creature behind the shield revealed itself.

It was a creature sheathed in black full plate armor, its crimson eyes glowing with hatred.

Even the ignorant Quagoa could understand that it was evil, it was violence — it was Death itself.

A *pyun!* rang out.

In that instant, the heads of three Quagoa took flight as one.

“UUUOOOOHHHHHHHH!!”

The roar battered at the bodies of the Quagoa.

The hair-raising impact made the Quagoa want to run away with all their heart.

Within their tribes, they considered themselves courageous warriors who did not fear death. However, they had never imagined a being like this in their wildest dreams. The monster before them obliterated their courage.

That being the case, why did they not flee right away?

That was because they lacked the strength to do so. Their instincts told them that if they ran, they would be slain in a single blow from behind. Even so, the eyes of that black being reminded the Quagoa of their desire to live.

“OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

That roar seemed to come from deep beneath the earth. The Quagoa whimpered in response, and took several steps back.

And then, as though to seize the opportunity which had presented itself, another being identical to it appeared. And then—

"Hiiiiiii!"

One of the Quagoa screamed.

As they looked toward the owner of that voice, they saw their comrade who had lost his head.

He was dead. There was no doubt about that. However, his arms started moving, as though grasping for something. It was clearly not a spasm or anything like that.

The only conclusion they could draw was that the corpse was moving.

As though trapped into a nightmare, the still-living Quagoa found themselves imprisoned in a cage of fear.

Clang, clang, went the two massive suits of armor, and then they raised identical, bizarre swords: flamberges.

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"So, according to the assault team's report, they haven't found a way to bring down the door yet, am I right?"

"Yes!"

The Quagoa whose pelt was streaked with red frowned as he listened to his underling's report.

He was Yozu, commander of the Quagoa vanguard. He possessed a hide that was as tough as orichalcum and his resistance to metal weaponry was even greater than that of regular Quagoa. He was a superior member of his species, a Red Quagoa.

Yozu turned his eyes from his bowing subordinate to the fortress on the other side of the suspension bridge. Beyond the fortress was a tunnel, and after the tunnel was the Dwarven city.

After conquering it, they would have a good location for a base and all their competition for ores would also be eliminated at the same time.

The combination of expanded territory and an unprecedented haul of ores and minerals would make the Quagoa great.

Once that happened, the Quagoa would someday come to rule the entire mountain range.

“If only we could defeat those Dragons…”

Yozu looked around worriedly after accidentally blurting out his true thoughts.

If anyone reacted, they gave absolutely no sign.

That put Yozu somewhat at ease.

The Quagoa had taken the former Dwarven capital as their home base.

The Royal Palace still stood proud within the city, but it was now the domain of the White Dragon. He was a Frost Dragon, who could exhale freezing breath.

The Quagoa had forged an alliance with the Frost Dragons. However, anyone who knew even a little bit about the truth would know that this was nothing like a relationship of equals. The Clan Lord might have prettied it up by saying that it was for mutual co-prosperity and whatnot, but not even the Lord himself believed what he was saying.

The truth was that the Dragons were strong, and their servants, the Quagoa were weak.

To the Dragons, the Quagoa were little more than emergency rations or convenient pawns.

Yozu had once met the Dragons in the presence of the Lord of the Clans, and that was the impression he got after hearing the mighty voice which emanated from its massive jaw. He was also shocked at the sight of the Lord grovelling before the Dragons.

He did not want to see a great hero reduced to that state, but Yozu was not stupid. He keenly understood the insurmountable difference between the might of the Dragons and the Quagoa.

Even so, he could not permit the Dragons to treat them like idiots.

...We can't do anything about it now. If we fight that Dragon Lord, the Quagoa race (we) will suffer irrecoverable damage even if we win. But... someday.

He was not the only one holding that wish in his heart. All the Quagoa who had met the Dragons — in other words, all the upper-class Quagoa — had the same desire.

To begin with, they needed to find a way to become immune to freezing breath. If Quagoa like that were not born, they would take terrible losses.

The search for that way would take a lot of time.

Yozu swept away his dark emotions. Right now, he had to destroy the Dwarves. That had not been done yet. It would be foolish to let worrying about the future affect what he could do in the present.

Yozu summoned his subordinates.

"Oi, destroy the fortress and then see if we can widen the tunnel walls to let more people in. We need to prepare as much as possible before the main force—"

Suddenly, Yozu's ears stood up. He thought he had heard a scream from somewhere.

No, it might not have been a scream. It might have been a threatening noise made by a monster. The problem with being underground was that it was very difficult to tell where sounds came from.

This time, however, he knew instantly.

That was because he saw the Quagoa from the assault team fleeing from the fortress while screaming at the top of their lungs.

A hubbub came from the Quagoa around Yozu.

Given the state of the Quagoa who had come back, it was very clear that they were terrified and confused. Several Quagoa even shoved their buddies from behind, and the latter tumbled into the Great Rift.

“What’s wrong? Is there an emergency?”

One of Yozu’s subordinates answered: “We’re not sure. Could it be a Dwarven counterattack?”

That was not possible. A Dwarven counterattack was well within the expected range of responses. It would not cause the assault teams to flee in panic.

It must have been some sort of special attack. Yozu had once heard that boiling oil was very painful.

“Gather the men and find out what’s going on. If it’s a Dwarven counterattack, continue the advance. We must not let them take the fortress back.”

Yozu’s men formed up into a company per his instructions, and they began crossing the bridge.

The screams continued during this time, and the assault team continued fleeing.

What were they running from? Was it the result of the mysterious power called magic?

As Yozu thought about the matter, a pair of silhouettes appeared at the door of the fortress.

They were big, black… somethings.

“—What, what are those? Giant Dwarves? Dwarf Lords?”

Yozu had never seen such beings before. Although he knew that the Dwarves used armor as part of their equipment, and that some sets of armor covered the entire body, what he saw now was completely different from what he had seen then.

In their right hands they carried wavy-bladed greatswords, while in their left they had massive shields.

Given that the Lord of the Clans was slightly different from regular Quagoa in appearance, the Dwarven Lords probably looked different from regular Dwarves.

Yozu did not know the true identity of the beings which stood at the entrance of the fortress like Nio statues. However, his animal instincts told him that they were dangerous entities.
(TL Note: Nio statues = temple guardian statues modelled after the Bright Kings of Buddhism)

He also understood why the assault teams had fled from those monsters with all their might.

His subordinates around him were frozen in shock, the same way he was. The only beings that still moved were the Quagoa running from the fortress. They did not look back; their energies were fully focused on getting across the suspension bridge.

The black suits of armor roared.

Even at such a great distance, the cry ripped through the air and made his fur stand on end. Yozu's guts clenched and turned cold. It was like feeling a Dragon's roar through his entire body.

As though on cue, he saw Quagoa slowly emerge from beside the black suits of armor.

Did they escape? Or did they betray us? No, that's not—

Yozu's eyes went wide.

One of the Quagoa he saw was missing its head.

He squinted, and saw that several Quagoa were trailing their innards behind them, while others seemed to be shambling in an uncoordinated manner, the left and right halves of their bodies moving out of sync, as though they had been cut in half.

Beings that moved even when they could not be alive were —

Magic! Magic that controls the dead!

“Is that the Dwarves’ secret weapon?”

Yozu agreed with what his subordinate had said.

Did they have an ace in the hole besides lightning-enchanted weaponry?

“...Are they Golems?”

It was said that when the Dragon took possession of the Royal Palace, it had fought monsters with those names. Apparently, they looked like armored statues.

“Are those the Dwarves called Golems?”

Yozu shook his head at his subordinate’s question.

“No, Golems are monsters. The Dwarves probably raised those.”

“Like the Nuks we tamed, then?”
(TL Note: ヌーク)

These Nuks were magical beasts.

Their males were 3.5 meters long and weighed 1200 kg. They were shaggy four-legged herbivores who could survive on even a little bit of algae. They were tough enough to survive in heavy snowfalls, so many monsters in the Azellisia Mountain Range fed on them.

In any event, there was no telling how well those black Golems could fight, but given the fleeing Quagoa and the assault teams' diminished numbers… no, more than that, Yozu's goosebumps and his cold sweat told him everything.

Beating them would not be easy, but fortunately, they only seemed to be watching them from afar and not trying to cross the bridge.

"It, it seems they came to take back the fortress."

"Y-yes, that's right. Alright, form up again while they're still stopped. At the same time, we'll prepare to — *they're moving!*"

The black suits of armor broke into a run, charging at the suspension bridge.

"Who was that! Who said that they were there to take back the fortress?!"

"Commander! Now's not the time for that! What should we do!?"

The Quagoa which Yozu had sent out bared their claws, ready for battle.

The black suits of armor braced their shields and blew through the Quagoa where they made contact.

Sent flying by overwhelming power, many Quagoa fell from the suspension bridge. The black suits of armor did not stop. Though they slowed down a little, they continued their charge forward with shields raised, like rampaging walls.

If this kept up, they would soon cross the bridge completely and reach this place.

And then, when that happened… what would happen? Realizing the mortal danger which awaited him, Yozu shouted.

"Cut, cut the bridge!"

If they destroyed the bridge, the main force would only be able to use the flanking route, and that would waste a lot of time. The Dwarves would probably strengthen their defense in the interim. Thus, one could consider their first objective of taking the fortress to be a failure.

After the loss of manpower and resources during this operation, failure would not be a matter that could be simply excused by a rebuke. However, all that paled in comparison to the danger of letting those black suits of armor cross the bridge.

If they reached this place, everybody here would die. The black suits of armor were such beings.

“Didn’t I tell you to cut the bridge?!”

The Quagoa could not help but watch the black suits of armor smash their men away with their unimaginable might. At the second cry, they finally managed to move. However, almost all the Quagoa who had been sent out from the rear were had been sent flying into the abyss, and there were only a few Quagoa left on the bridge to face the black suits of armor.

All of those Quagoa desperately bit and clawed at the steel suspension cables of the bridge.

“Have one of the assault teams stall their advance!”

Being told to stop the Golems right after hearing the command to destroy the bridge was no different from a suicide mission. Even so, a suicide squad immediately assembled and bravely went forth.

As expected, the suicide squad bounced off the shields, but some of them managed to get past and hurled themselves upon the black suits of armor. However, the black suits of armor paid them no heed. Being bitten did not seem to hurt them, and they continued their advance.

The bridge had not yet fallen.

If this kept up, the black suits of armor would make it all the way across.

As Yozu realized this, his body began moving on its own. He leapt down from his command post high above, and used the force of his landing and the sharpness of his claws to deliver a hit to the steel cables of the bridge.

A great *ping* tore through the air.

The suspension bridge rose and fell like a gigantic wave, and broke.

Yozu could not withstand the serpentine thrashing of the suspension bridge and was thrown into the air. However, he managed to grab a dancing cable before he was swallowed up by the yawning darkness beneath him. Since Yozu could not control his movements in mid-air, it was an unimaginable stroke of luck for him. He pulled himself along the cable as his body swayed in mid-air, and managed to make contact with the edge of the cliff.

However, he did not even have the time to catch his breath. A malevolent cold filled his body. Yozu listened to his instincts and threw himself prone.

In that instant, a screaming object swept past the fur on Yozu's back. Unbelievably enough, that object was a flying Quagoa. Under these dire circumstances, the black suit of armor had managed to throw one of the suicide squad members at Yozu with its ridiculous arm strength.

The thrown Quagoa hit one of Yozu's men, who was still frozen in shock. The two of them disintegrated into chunks of gory meat with a brief, agonized cry of *"Pigya!"*

However, that was all, because the suicide squad and the black suits of armor vanished into the Great Rift.

Silence filled the air.

Yozu slowly peered into the darkness of the Great Rift. He was not the only one to do so; all the survivors looked into the darkness that had swallowed everything. All of them knew that there was no surviving that drop; even so, they could not erase their fear that the black suits of armor would come clambering up the sides of the chasm.

After what seemed like forever, Yozu finally sighed in relief.

They did not look like they would be coming back.

Looking around, he saw that there were precious few of his men who had survived.

Even so, the fact that they had survived against those black suits of armor was worthy of praise.

“We’re pulling back!”

If they did not report those Golems to the people on top, things would be very bad for them.

If those were being mass-produced, it was the Quagoa who would be annihilated instead. Yozu did not feel that there were only two of them.

“...How fearsome those Dwarves are.”

Yozu deeply regretted underestimating the Dwarves. To think they knew how to produce such monsters—

“In any case, we need to inform the main body about this. Messengers!”

The people who ran over in response to Yozu’s call were the Quagoa Riders, who far exceeded the average Quagoa in mobility. They possessed a special ability which made them immune to the fatigue caused by extended sprinting.

The reason why he had called this many of them over was because moving in small numbers ran the risk of the entire group being wiped out by a monster ambush. That was not to say that moving in force guaranteed safety, but that it did not matter how many died as long as one of them survived to pass their message on to headquarters.

“Alright! Go! Don’t forget, your mission is very important!”

Yozu gave another order as he watched them leave.

Needless to say, it was to fall back immediately to meet with the Lord of the Clans.

OVERLORD [11] The craftsman of Dwarf

4章 こうしょう

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

CHAPTER 4

A CRAFTSMAN AND NEGOTIATION

Part 1

The two summoned Death Knights vanished from the other side of the gates. They roared in anticipation of joyful slaughter, while the cries of the dying rang out. Once the gates slowly closed, the thickness of the double doors meant that the sounds of carnage on the other side did little more than tickle the eardrums.

“Things should be alright for now.”

There was a time limit on Death Knights that were not made with corpses. Even so, if the estimates of Quagoa combat power from their captives was accurate, they should be able to defeat a sizable portion of the attackers even without knowing their opponents’ numbers. If the enemy was not incompetent, they would surely pull back to regroup after taking sufficient losses.

I hope they don’t retreat just yet. If they build a camp, it’ll mean the danger is still clear and present. That way, the Dwarven nation will have to work with us. I should order the Death Knights to hold back for now… it’s quite troublesome when you can’t win by too large a margin.

As Ainz contemplated these details in silence, he glanced to the commander-in-chief, who was looking at him with a twitching smile on his face. Ainz had no idea why he had that smile born of terror on his face — and in that moment an imaginary light bulb shone above Ainz’ head.

He should have become used to my appearance by now, so it’s probably because of the Quagoa screaming outside. Well, it’s true that the wails of the dying can be somewhat disturbing.

That said, Ainz felt that he should not mind the screaming of the enemy so much. Still, he would not be human — or a Dwarf, rather — if he did not think that way.

But how can someone like that be a commander of warriors? This is somewhat worrying.

He knew he was thinking too much about this, but Ainz continued looking at the commander-in-chief. At this moment, Gondo approached him.

“Then, Your Majesty. I shall be returning home for a bit.”

“Ahh. Then, will you help me settle things on your end?”

“Of course. I will arrange for it and send it out. It’s alright if the time or whatever isn’t adjusted, right? I can count on your spells if something happens, right?”

Ainz extended a fist and bumped it against Gondo’s. They had talked about many things before coming here, and it would seem it had been effective.

Gondo really does talk a lot...

He tended to monopolize the conversation, and he spoke at such lengths that it seemed never ending. This must have been the result of being obsessed about the almost lost-art of runesmithing and then being ostracized. That was why he kept babbling about the topic to Ainz — who had an interest in the topic — like a burst dam.

Ainz could understand how he felt, because there were times when Ainz had also wanted to talk to people who shared his interests. However, Ainz was not going along with this long monologue out of the kindness of his heart.

Gondo lightly tapped his magic rucksack and began walking away.

The commander-in-chief seemed to have something to say to the retreating Gondo, but he did not call out to him.

“Then, what should we do now? Should we wait a while before opening the gate and inspecting the results of the battle?”

The commander-in-chief must have anticipated Ainz’s question. He replied instantly, as though he had already prepared the answer beforehand.

“It is deeply disrespectful to have the sovereign of a nation waiting here. I feel we should proceed to the Council Chamber and present your suggestion to everyone.”

“Why not take a look at the aftermath?”

“I think Your Majesty’s introduction is more important. I sent a message to the Council while the Quagoa were attacking. They are probably still fumbling for some way to deal with the situation now. I feel that we should present them with new information before they panic and give bad orders.”

“I see. In that case, I have no objections. Please, lead on.”

“Understood. However, Your Majesty’s magical beasts will surely terrify the common folk. It shames me to ask, but could you have them stand by here? We will take care of them to the best of our ability if you inform us of the key points…”

Ainz looked towards Aura, who nodded.

“I see. Then they shall wait here.”

Ainz indicated to a corner of the garrison with a bony finger, and the commander nodded in agreement.

“Also, there is no need to care for them. We will take care of that. I will have three of my followers accompany me.”

Ainz selected Shalltear, Aura and Zenberu. He ordered the others to wait here.

The commander-in-chief looked somewhat relieved. It would seem he did not want to have the undead strutting through the streets.

"Then, shall we go?"

"Ah, please do."

Ainz and company walked proudly through the Dwarven city, led by the commander-in-chief. An almost painful amount of curious stares focused on him, while Dwarven mothers who saw Ainz hid their children indoors. That made him somewhat disappointed.

Of course, he could have been less obvious if he wished.

If he had put on a mask, much fewer people would have stared at him. That said, there was a reason why he did not choose to cover his face.

It was because he wanted to announce his arrival in the city of the Dwarves. It was not very likely that there would be a player in the Dwarven nations if it had to seek external help against an invasion like this. However, there might be low-level players here, or items they had left behind.

Like that spell-sealing crystal.

In order to avoid being attacked by such items, he would have to manufacture proof of his visit in an aboveboard manner. In this way, they would not be able to settle things clandestinely.

In addition, while he had not yet decided what sort of ambassadorial party he would send, it was quite likely that he might end up using undead beings for that purpose. Therefore, he wanted to let them get used to it.

"Still, nobody seems worried, despite the extent of the Quagoa invasion."

Ainz asked the commander-in-chief that question after seeing two red-faced Dwarves stagger out of a tavern, arms around each other's shoulders.

The unmistakeable scent of alcohol surrounded them.

"That is because the people do not know the Quagoa have attacked."

"And… why is that?"

Their sense of self-preservation appeared to be terminally defective.

The commander-in-chief seemed to have read Ainz's mind, and he replied:

"The Quagoa advanced too quickly, so the information did not spread. Depending on the Council's decision, it ought to start spreading within an hour."

"Hm. Well, I did order my subordinates to retake the bridge, so once they do so, the city will be safe for the time being, no? This is quite an important factor for when we begin trade with this country."

"That is hard to say. Given the size of the enemy force, we don't know when the opposition will begin their advance in earnest. Once we take the bridge back, we'll need to solidify our defenses, investigate their flanking route, and plan a strategy against them."

Ainz smiled evilly within his heart.

It looked like there would be many chances to sell this country favors in the future. That being the case, it might be best not to change his Death Knights' orders to retake the bridge.

"—What?!"

Ainz's voice set the commander-in-chief's shoulders trembling.

"Aiiiee! What, what is it, Your Majesty?!"

"No, it's nothing. Something on my end. There's no need to worry. *There's no need to ask further,*" Ainz emphasised those words in iron tones to shut down the other man's questions.

This reaction — which was quite unlike Ainz — was because he had lost his composure.

There was no response from the two Death Knights he had made, which should have been in the vicinity of Feoh Gēr.

There was only one conclusion he could draw from this shocking conclusion.

—The Death Knights had been defeated.

Hoh!

Death Knights were fairly weak to Ainz. However, by the standards of this world, they were formidable opponents even for the most powerful members of a nation. Anyone who could defeat two fearsome knights like that must be very powerful.

In addition, their responses had vanished at almost the same time.

Had they been simultaneously destroyed as part of a carefully laid plan?

Had someone finished them off with an area-effect spell?

Had a powerful individual simply obliterated them in one stroke?

Whatever the answer was, there was certainly another mighty being present, apart from the bizarre masked magic caster he had encountered in the Royal Capital.

Someone who could defeat the defense-oriented Death Knights by themselves would probably be over level 45.

"Does that mean I've been found out?"

The commander-in-chief looked at Ainz in response to his mumblings, but Ainz had no time to worry about him.

An unknown, powerful being was most likely to be a player. If an enemy of Ainz's level had come to this world, a measly two Death Knights would be child's play to deal with.

If there's a player-related entity here who's not connected to the Dwarves, does that mean they're on the side of the Quagoa? Then, are they related to the people who brainwashed Shalltear?

Searing fire blazed up in his chest.

Hitherto smoldering embers flared into a raging inferno, as though someone had poured gasoline on them. However, they were swiftly suppressed.

“No, it’s not possible. If they were related, the Dwarven city would have fallen long ago. It’s more likely that it’s a mighty individual from this world. However, I can’t conclude that there’s no connection. That being the case, I will need to alter my plans.”

Ainz had originally hoped that the war between the Quagoa and the Dwarves would go on.

With the obvious enemy of the Quagoa before them, the Dwarves might well choose to flock to Ainz’s banner. However, leaving the Quagoa alone — giving them too much time — would be very dangerous.

If they were a race that habitually spawned powerful individuals, then while they might only have slain Death Knights now, who knew what else they would destroy in the future? Right now — while he could still deal with them — the best thing to would be to either enslave them or annihilate them completely.

The latter might well be the better course of action.

Ideally, I would be able to subjugate the Quagoa and have them threaten the Dwarves from the shadows, but… A single misstep might lead to a fatal error. It would be safer not to do that.

“Your Majesty, the Council Chamber is in sight.”

As he turned to look in the direction where the commander-in-chief was pointing, a large building — certainly big for a Dwarf, but sizable even by Ainz’s standards — came into view.

The commander spoke briefly with the guards at the door, and they let Ainz and the others pass without inspection.

The reason why they waived the inspection for Ainz and company while still staring unabashedly at the undead Ainz was surely because the commander had exercised his authority.

“Then, Your Majesty, I shall make a full report to the Council. May I trouble you to wait here for a while?”

There was no reason to object. More to the point, it might be troublesome if he did not explain Ainz’s contribution to this nation.

“Where shall we wait, then?”

The commander-in-chief glanced to one of the Dwarf guards, and the man stepped forward.

“The, the waiting room is that way. Permit me to escort you there.”

“Really now. I’ll leave that to you, then.”

The Dwarf — who trembled in both body and voice — brought them to a somewhat cramped room. Then again, it would probably not have been cramped for a Dwarf. It was just the right size for Aura and Shalltear. However, they had Zenberu there, who was large of stature. Just waiting in the room felt very claustrophobic for him.

Given that the soldier had taken a look at Zenberu before bringing him here, this must have been the largest and the most luxurious VIP room in this building. Sure enough, the ornaments around them were all exquisitely crafted and looked as though they might actually move.

Ainz had once made Avatara of his past companions, and he deeply appreciated the difficulty of making such intricate statuary. It was possible for something to look beautiful in profile but ugly when viewed head-on.

Ainz picked up a statuette — a Dwarf riding on the back of a lizard.

It’s plainly obvious that the Dwarves have outstanding craftsmanship. Mm, I’d like to have such skills… I wonder if I could remake the Avataras? If I could, would I be able to make something better after practicing? — alright.

Ainz decided to address Zenberu, who seemed distinctly out of place here.

"Zenberu, continue with us for a bit longer."

"Ah, Your Majesty, I'd like to stay here instead, if it pleases you. Frankly speaking, it gives me a headache to talk with those great people."

A strange turn of phrase. It was different from how he had been during the trip here. Perhaps he had changed the way he spoke because he had come to the Dwarven Kingdom.

"...You *are* the overseer of a tribe, am I correct?"

"Shalltear-sama, one can be good or bad at various things. Also, I would feel bad if I inconvenienced His Majesty."

Ainz understood Zenberu's meaning, but he shook his head nonetheless.

"No, I will take you along. If something happens, I won't be able to protect you if you're too far away. I don't think there'll actually be any danger, but carelessness is for fools. For all we know, we might be within the palm of the enemy. Remember that at all times."

"Yes! I have seared it into my heart!"

Even though Ainz did not feel that the Dwarves would harm someone who had saved their country, he repeated for safety's sake.

What's this? Shalltear's responding pretty well today. Did something happen?

"Ah, then, Your Majesty… What should I do?"

"Hm? Frankly speaking, just listen to us, Zenberu. No matter what happens, do not take part in any fighting."

Ainz nodded as Zenberu indicated his understanding.

“Very good. Now then — Aura, Shalltear, can you inspect my clothes and see if they’re messed up?”

The Dwarven soldier sent to show them the way arrived just after the two of them finished inspecting their attire.

◆ ◆ ◆

Ainz was led to a room where the Dwarves waited.

Resplendent in his full panoply, Ainz strode forth with chest upthrust. His back was ramrod straight, his head was held high, and his bearing was that of a king. The obsidian radiance from the aura behind him glowed softly, as a substitute for cologne. Surely nobody would look down on him after all these preparations.

He kept the wand — which substituted for a royal scepter — at his waist. It was infused with a 1st-tier spell, but since he had no intention of activating it, it should not pose any problems.

After looking at himself up and down, he felt that this getup was somewhat at odds with the objective of seeking friendly relations, but Aura and Shalltear strongly approved of it.

The problem was that both of them thought too highly of Ainz, so he felt uneasy about relying on their opinion.

Thus, he asked Zenberu for his view on the matter.

After some fidgeting — from being asked about something which lay outside his field of expertise — Zenberu finally said something along the lines of “Your attire would surely inspire awe in anyone who sees it”. Ainz took his word for it, and came here.

However, the Dwarves he encountered turned pale, their postures shot through with nervousness. Of course, that too was an appropriate reaction to a king.

“Announcing the arrival of His Majesty, the Sorcerer King!”

He could hear the Dwarf announcer from the other side of the door.

When the door opened, Ainz entered the chamber.

It looked like a meeting room, and there were eight Dwarves there.

Incidentally, he had learned their names, their posts, their looks and features from the commander-in-chief.

There was the High Priest of Earth, who governed everything to do with magic. He held sway over divine magic casters and even arcane magic casters.

There was the Forgemaster, who controlled all production which derived from the forges.

There was the commander-in-chief who had brought them here. He was responsible for all security and military matters. Once, he had commanded many Dwarven soldiers, but the fact that he only had less than a hundred men now made the title a joke.

There was the Director of Food Production, who managed food production and other industries which did not concern the forges.

There was the Cabinet Secretary, who was in charge of everything which fell outside the jurisdiction of the other leaders here.

There was the Brewmaster, who was on this Council because there had to be a leadership position for the Dwarven people’s favorite pastime of alcohol.

There was the Master of Caves and Mines, who had a lot of power in this city due to his influence over the sphere of mining and resource extraction.

Once, there had been an organization called the Merchant’s Guild, but due to the lack of traders and trade in general, the title of Merchant’s Guildmaster was now a hollow position in charge of foreign affairs.

Those were the eight of them.

Ainz slowly swept his gaze across everyone. Seven of them stared at him. The last one — the commander-in-chief — had a look of fatigue on his face instead, and his eyes met Ainz's.

Ainz was pretending to be the picture of calm, but his heart was in chaos.

Oi! I can't even tell them apart! Maybe some of them have shorter beards than the others, but aren't they all pretty much the same length? Was he lying to me? No, that must have been how he saw it. What should I do?

Zenberu's memories had depicted them all with identical faces, and at first Ainz thought it was simply because the Lizardman saw all Dwarves as the same. He had even felt that Zenberu's ability to recognize faces needed improvement. However, that was not the case.

I'm sorry I doubted you, Zenberu. You were telling me the truth all along.

In this world, there was no practice of exchanging business cards upon a meeting, a fact which he had long lamented. Ainz felt the same way today, and then he gathered his strength into his belly.

Next would come a presentation which he had already made several times. Of note was the fact that he had two Guardians behind him and a subordinate of his subordinate. He could not allow them to see him make a fool of himself.

...If only I hadn't brought the three of them...

However, his regrets were immaterial. The die had been cast, after all.
(TL Note: *Alea iacta est*)

Still — while he had psyched himself for it, there was not a single trace of the dialogue starting. The silence remained unbroken for a full minute after his arrival.

What's going on? Standard practice for a company would be to start by the host introducing their staff, right? Shouldn't the commander-in-chief introduce us? ...Or should I make the first move? I'm not too well-versed in courtly etiquette and I don't want to appear boorish.

According to courtly etiquette, inferiors could not address the king directly. Direct interaction required a permission of some sort. In other words, the king was an untouchable being. Therefore, if Ainz initiated the dialogue, would the Dwarves look down upon him?

After looking at the Dwarves, was the answer yes or no?

That said, I doubt anyone will slight me, given the country's situation and the actions I took. If that really happens, then I might as well say that I won't negotiate with a pack of buffoons like them.

Having made up his mind, Ainz decided to make his pitch.

"I am the ruler of the Sorcerous Kingdom, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown."

The Dwarves sprang into motion, as though they were reconnected to a power supply.

"We, we bid you welcome, sovereign of the Sorcerous Kingdom, Your Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown. May we offer you a seat? There are seats for your esteemed followers over there."

Ainz nodded, and then he was ushered to what he called the birthday boy's place. He sat down with regal aplomb, using movements he had practiced over and over. Shalltear, Aura and Zenberu sat behind Ainz.

"Then, we shall introduce ourselves. Firstly, I am this country's—"

And so, the Dwarves gave their names.

The opening seemed to have gone without a hitch, but Ainz could not contain his worries.

Just keeping their eight names in mind was already difficult. Having to associate each of those names and titles with a face was proving to be quite the challenge.

Names were easy enough to remember, but adding a title onto that made him uneasy. Things like whether it was Master of Caves and Mines or Master of Mines and Caves only made things worse.

That said, Ainz managed to remember them. He would not have been able to do it had he not inquired about them with the commander-in-chief earlier.

“Please allow us to thank you on behalf of this country. Without Your Majesty, this country would have been destroyed.”

Those words were spoken by the Master of Caves and Mines. All the Dwarves present nodded in response.

The members of the Council apparently took turns leading it, so the leader this time around was the Master of Caves and Mines.

“Pay it no heed. Saving someone in trouble is common sense.”

“Your Majesty is a truly magnanimous person. We will surely aid you to the best of our ability if any trouble besets you. That said, I fear we cannot do much to aid your august person, who commands the troops that saved our nation from extinction with but two of their number.”

“It’s nothing like that. My country is indeed powerful in a military sense. However, there are some inadequacies when it comes to other fields. I would be very grateful if you could provide help to me in those aspects.”

“I see. We would be glad to be of service to Your Majesty — to the Sorcerous Kingdom. However, before that, we pray Your Majesty will tell us the reason for your visit to our country, if it is convenient. The commander-in-chief has already told us, but we would like to hear it directly from you.”

The Master of Caves and Mines narrowed his eyes slightly.

We’ll see through any lies. His unyielding determination was palpable.

I can’t expect them all to feel goodwill towards me… Well, given the difference in power between our nations, anyone would be cautious.

The same applied to Ainz. If the top-ranked guild in YGGDRASIL — Seraphim — offered a World-Class Item and asked to negotiate, Ainz would also suspect some kind of a trap.

Therefore, he was not displeased with the Dwarves' reaction.

"Firstly, I would like to initiate friendly relations between our nations. Then, I would like to engage in trade."

"—Is that so."

"I have heard from one of your countrymen that your staple foods are mushrooms and meat, am I wrong? I recall something about farms at the feet of the mountain which raise fresh vegetables, but apparently they are few in number and their variety is quite poor. My nation can supply fresh vegetables and — do the alcoholic spirits of human kingdoms and the Sorcerous Kingdom hold any interest for you?"

The topic of alcohol made the Dwarves' eyes light up. That was a very frank reaction.

"I also hear that this country trades with the human nation to the east, but not to any great degree."

"Indeed. Our traffic is merely twenty dwarves' worth of merchandise. Currently, we are developing magic items which can hold an unlimited supply of goods."

The Merchant's Guildmaster gave that reply.

"I see. Is it true that there are few Dwarven trade caravans due to the dangerous mountain roads?"

"That is indeed the case."

Another Dwarf supplied that answer.

"We cannot carry too many goods due to the steepness and danger of the mountain paths. In addition, moving in groups draws the monsters' attention.

There are many monsters which will attack regardless of the numbers of their prey. In particular, aerial ambushes are hard to deal with."

It was true that conventional trading methods would require great effort. The Empire only engaged in limited trade with the Dwarves due to the lack of profit in doing so. However, it was precisely that reason which made them a very lucrative trading partner for the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Unfortunately, the only notable export which the Sorcerous Kingdom could boast was their undead. However, to the Dwarven nation, even regular food would sell well.

What a marvellous trading partner.

Ainz smiled evilly in his heart as he asked his question.

"If that is the case, then I must further recommend national relations with me — with the Sorcerous Kingdom, so we can export foodstuffs."

"...We have not yet inquired of the precise location of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Can we transport our trade goods there by ourselves?"

"Having your country's people move cargo by themselves would still be quite dangerous. I feel that my nation should take the lead in establishing a proper trade route so your nation's people can safely transport their wares. When that happens, wagons and carriages will be able to move smoothly. Of course, they will not be pulled by anything as fragile as horses, but by other beasts of burden."

"Could those be… the undead?"

One of the Dwarves, his face filled with disgust, asked that question.

Ainz recalled that he was apparently the Forgemaster.

"Precisely. I propose the use of undead-pulled cargo wagons, which possess the power to defend themselves and will never tire. They will surely make for excellent transportation tools. In truth, our nation has already made use of them, and the response from the citizens is very good. In addition, there are other advantages to using the undead—”

Just as Ainz was about to launch into an enthusiastic presentation, the Forgemaster interrupted him.

“—Is it not true that the undead will attack the living?”

Ainz pouted internally, but he responded with supreme confidence.

“It is true that many people would think that way about an average undead being. And to be fair, it is true. The undead are beings which hate and attack the living. *However!*”

Ainz placed particular emphasis on that word.

“Under my absolute authority, the undead of the Sorcerous Kingdom will not pose any problems for you. You may rest easy knowing that.”

The Forgemaster’s mouth pursed into a へ shape. He did not seem to believe Ainz at all.

He must have had a bad experience where the undead slew his family, or something. As Ainz contemplated that possibility, he played one of his trump cards.

“In addition, my nation can supply labor.”

“Labor?”

“During my journey, I spoke with one of your countrymen whom I saved from the Quagoa—”

Ainz had not done so on purpose, but it was not a complete accident, so he decided to phrase it as doing them a favor.

“—And I heard of the work that goes on in your country’s mines. While it is work for Dwarven miners, the undead can handle it for you.”

“What? Can they really do that?”

The eyes of the Master of Caves and Mines went wide, having taken the bait.

“Of course. I have conducted this experiment in human nations, and it was successful. In fact, the owner of the mines who rented them even requested for additional undead miners.”

He had heard about this from Albedo when he had sent her a worried [Message], so it was not a lie.

“So you’ve done that sort of thing in human nations…”

The Master of Mines and Caves muttered as though in awe.

“It would seem your country is familiar with the special characteristics of the undead…”

“Mm, well, we know about their more common traits...”

Ainz raised his voice to address the High Priest of Earth.

“Then, I trust I need not elaborate on how the undead make for excellent laborers?

The Dwarves exchanged looks, and then began speaking one after the other.

“Your Majesty’s words are understandable. If we could safely control the undead…”

“Being able to reallocate the manpower assigned to mining is a very attractive proposal.”

“However…”

That “however” would probably be followed by doubts about whether they could really trust the undead. It was natural they would feel conflicted about a method that was different from how they had done things until now.

Ultimately, this was merely publicity for his firm's products, and not a serious attempt to close a sale. Of course, if they could accept undead labor, it would certainly delight him.

"Well, I merely meant to say that I could provide such laborers. I understand your unease towards the undead—"

"—Your Majesty, I would like to ask a question about the undead before that. Could we purchase them as a defensive force?"

The commander-in-chief's question sent ructions through the Dwarves.

"Commander-in-chief, it is too risky to rely on the military power of other nations to keep the peace!"

"I know that. However, the undead of the Sorcerous Kingdom are extremely powerful. With them, around, we have no need to fear any Quagoa attack. There are many benefits to purchasing them as a final defensive line. The most important thing, the thing we must all consider, is the safety of our nation. Now that we have lost our fortress, we need power, more than anything else."

"Even so, don't you think it's more dangerous to have the hands of another nation around our throats?!"

"I told you, now isn't the time to talk about that sort of thing!"

The Forgemaster and the commander-in-chief glared at each other.

"...We'll leave it as that. Those words will be saved for when it's only us. This is not something we should be saying in front of His Majesty, who came all the way here from his kingdom. Forgive this gaffe, Your Majesty. This conflict was caused by the attractive nature of Your Majesty's proposals, and we would be very grateful if you could permit it to pass unnoticed. —Then, may I know what Your Majesty desires from this country? I feel that we have practically nothing to offer."

"Certainly not. First, I desire ores. My country's stockpiles are limited."

"—I see," the Merchant's Guildmaster smiled. "So that's why you suggested undead labor. If we could excavate minerals in large quantities, then there would be an ample surplus. In other words, you want to keep the price of ores low. Is that it?"

Ainz had not thought that far ahead, but Ainz nodded and pretended that it was the case.

"Indeed it is so. You have seen through me."

No wonder, the Dwarves thought as understanding dawned on them.

"Also, I would like the weapons and armor crafted by the forges of your nation. I hear that Dwarven battle equipment is of exemplary quality."

All the people Ainz had asked about this topic agreed that this was an unassailable fact.

However, processed weapons and armor were more expensive. If they bought from the Dwarves, then there would be fewer armorsmiths and weaponsmiths in the Sorcerous Kingdom. If there was a clear technological difference between the two countries, it would be better to improve the technology of one's own nation rather than take the foolish action of buying large quantities of superior arms and armor.

However, if there was no competition, the smiths within the Sorcerous Kingdom would not hone their skills. The weapons and armor purchased from the Dwarves might serve as a positive stimulus for that.

Of course, there were many ways to handle this, such as by collecting tariffs and the like. One had to ensure that he could make a profit off the Dwarves and not constantly import from them, among other headaches.

The simple answer would be to hand all this to Albedo and Demiurge. However, Ainz had his own considerations as well.

His plan was to limit sales to the newly-founded Adventurer's Guild, or rent them to adventurers.

Low prices were very attractive to adventurers, and keeping them alive would also benefit the Sorcerous Kingdom. If they could sell old goods at low prices, they might be able to increase the survival rates of adventurers at the same time.

“While we have not thanked Your Majesty for sharing all this with us, these are questions which cannot be answered immediately, in particular on the matter of wargear. Could you give us some time to discuss this?”

“Of course. Discuss until you reach a conclusion. I will not be upset even if we cannot begin trade immediately. My own subordinates are already equipped with high-end gear. I merely wish to acquire arms and armor for my people.”

All right, Ainz thought.

This was the crucial moment. It was time to complete his objective for coming to this city.

“Shall we discuss the matter of the Quagoa?”

Tension immediately filled the air.

“The response to the Quagoa invasion was merely a personal decision. Is that correct, commander-in-chief?”

“Indeed.”

“However, what would have happened if I was not around?”

“If Your Majesty had not been around, we would have had to rely on a single gate to block the enemy advance. Once the gate was breached, we would have needed to mobilize the citizens to engage in a decisive battle within the city in order to buy time for the children to flee. I imagine that would have been the case.”

The Dwarves all had bitter expressions on their faces.

Perhaps it was due to the commander-in-chief's earlier report, but the utter absence of objections or counter-arguments spoke of the excellence of everyone here.

There was nobody present who was driven by idealism, emotion or personal gain. If there was anyone like that here, particularly if they possessed authority or influence, they would waste time pointlessly before even the basics were completed, chattering away until the meeting was concluded. The fact that there was nobody like that here was worthy of praise.

"Then, please explain to me in more detail. What would this decisive battle entail?"

"It is difficult to answer because we do not know the enemy's full battle strength. However — assuming there were 1,000 Quagoa — we would be in dire straits. Repelling them would be very difficult, and all we would accomplish would be to weaken our nation due to the loss of resources and manpower."

Why did it end up this way, the commander-in-chief muttered.

It was probably because the fortress at the Great Rift was too strong. The Dwarves had grown arrogant, believing "it'll be okay as long as we have it".

Ainz felt this way as well.

He had tasted the bitter fruit of carelessness in the form of Shalltear.

"If we have only one ace in the hole, when it is defeated, then we are undone. Thus, I feel we need another trump card, in the form of Your Majesty's power."

Ainz raised his hand to silence the Dwarves, who seemed about to speak. The commander-in-chief might have seized the reins of the conversation, but Ainz was not done speaking yet.

"The Quagoa have been repulsed for the time being, but Feoh Gēr is not yet at peace. That is my opinion."

The expressions on the Dwarves' faces were universally sour.

After making sure that everyone was fully aware of his prior point, Ainz decided to seize the moment and speak.

“Without me, it will be very difficult to repulse the next Quagoa invasion. Even for someone like me, the destruction of a nation which I am about to begin trade with would be quite troublesome. What do you think? Will you not make use of my strength? Given the power of my nation, I can guarantee that your nation will not be attacked for a time. ...Yes. For instance I could help in taking back that Quagoa nest, the former Dwarven capital, I believe.”

The air seemed to shudder.

This was an entirely new reaction.

The Master of Caves and Mines licked his lips.

“Your Majesty, do you mean that such a thing would be possible?”

“If I prepare for it, of course.”

The Forgemaster folded his arms before him and glared at Ainz.

“...That seems far too idealistic. Why are you giving us so much help? What do you want from us?”

“Oi, you’ve said too much.”

The Forgemaster snorted at his colleague’s words.

“It’s like waving a bottle of fine wine in front of a stranger. Do you really think there are no strings attached?”

“Ngg!”

“A reasonable question. Then let me be frank with you. One of the reasons is because I believe it is better to establish diplomatic relations with your country than the Quagoa. I believe that you gentlemen of this fine country understand the concepts of common sense and indebtedness, and that you owe me a certain debt of gratitude. Now — consider a side which is about to win, and a side which is about to lose. Who will be more grateful if I lend them my strength?"

"Mm. That is the case."

"In addition, I would like this debt to be paid not in words, but in a material fashion. This leads to another reason."

"I see, so it's about payment. Then, do you want gold, or rare metals, or exotic ores? Or do you want mining rights as well?"

Of course. Ainz wanted to say that, but he swallowed those words and resisted the urge to speak them.

"No, I want something different. I want to recruit the runesmiths of this country to my nation."

The Dwarves blinked as one.

"What? Is that so hard to understand?"
「为啥？这话又有些难以理解了哦？」

The Forgemaster frowned more deeply than the others.

"...It is because runic arms and armor are very rare in the nations surrounding the Sorcerous Kingdom. I find them to be very valuable articles. In other words, they are very valuable. Therefore, I thought of recruiting runesmiths and having them produce runecrafted wargear in my nation."

"Will you take them as slaves?"

Ainz sighed with exaggerated loudness at the Forgemaster.

"I will do nothing of the sort. Did you not hear me speak? I said I wanted to open international ties and begin trade, did I not? Do you actually think I would take the people of such a partner nation as slaves? ...Frankly speaking, I'm a little disappointed. All I had in mind was recruiting runesmiths and having them make runic equipment in my country."

“In that case, what if we gave you top priority on the sales of runecrafted gear?”

“...No. It would not be worth the investment. If you wish to use my strength, then you must let the runesmiths work in the Sorcerous Kingdom and allow us to form a monopoly on the sale of their products. That is what my nation wants and it is the price of taking back your former capital. When can you give me an answer?”

The Dwarves looked at each other.

“I see. Perhaps tomorrow—”

“That might be a little troublesome,” interjected the commander-in-chief. “Don’t forget this city is still in danger of being attacked by the Quagoa. Even if His Majesty accepts the task of defeating the Quagoa, it will take time for him to gather his troops. With that point in mind, we cannot wait until tomorrow. We should give him an answer right away.”

Ainz looked over the Dwarves.

“It is not my place to speak here. However, if you are truly in such dire straits, then having me fulfil my earlier promises will also be quite troublesome. If the situation becomes very bad, then I will have to add several more conditions. After all, one must expect to pay more for last-minute work.”

“Mm. The commander-in-chief is right, and Your Majesty’s words are also very sensible. Then, Your Majesty, while we apologize for the imposition, can you wait for us in the room from just now? We would like to reach a conclusion as quickly as possible.”

“I have no objections to that. I shall wait there, then.”

With that, Ainz rose, and left the room in the company of his subordinates.

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The room was still veiled in silence even after the departure of the Sorcerer King. Shortly after, somebody exhaled, and that dispersed the tension that hung in the air.

“What, what the hell was that?!”

“That was an unbelievable monster! Commander-in-chief, that monster made my hair stand on end. There’s no doubt about the fear he commands.”

“I almost thought I was going to piss myself!”

The Dwarves all began shouting. They poured out all the things their strained nerves had been holding in check.

“What should we do? He’s evil incarnate. If even a single thing of what he said is true, it would scare the hell out of me.”

“How could anyone radiating such an evil light be benevolent? Look at him, how many of the living do you think he’s murdered up till now?”

“Mmm. He must have taken so many lives he can’t even remember them all. And to think that spine-chilling face could actually utter such normal-sounding words.”

“He must be gathering equipment for some great invasion. For his army of darkness!”

“Also, I hate how he’s so easy to understand and agree with. He feels just like those devils who steal souls with contracts.”

They were unanimous in rejecting the Sorcerer King’s proposal. Many of them agreed that the words of the undead could not be trusted.

“However, His Majesty’s proposal is very attractive to our country. In the first place, our country will be destroyed if we don’t do something about the Quagoa. In addition, the Sorcerer King is the only person who can save us.”

The commander-in-chief was the sole voice of opposition.

His words made the other Dwarves look like they had chewed a bitter worm.

“Let me make sure again. Is there no way we can deal with the Quagoa with our strength alone?”

“There’s no way. With the help of the Sorcerer King we might be able to take the fortress back, but there are far too many things we need to do. Right now, all we can hope for is to take the fortress back. Had His Majesty not come here, the Quagoa might be flooding into the city by now.”

“If the Sorcerer King spoke the truth, then there were sightings of Quagoa in Feoh Raiđō as well.”

The Dwarves clutched their heads.

“...What if we just borrowed the Sorcerer King’s power and then pretended that we knew nothing about it?”

“That would only aggravate that monster. Even I would be unhappy in his position. After all, we’d be the people who only cared about borrowing military power for our own gain and whatnot.”

“Still, the timing for this is just too much of a coincidence. Could the Sorcerer King be pulling the strings behind the scenes?”

“It’s quite likely, but we have no proof. All we can do is guess.”

“The important thing here is that the Sorcerer King chose us and not the Quagoa. If we displease him, we’ll be putting a noose around our own necks. Trying to investigate him would also be very dangerous.”

“...Does the Sorcerer King drink?”

“Do you think he can? ...I guess you can’t trust a guy who doesn’t drink, after all.”

“Still…”

Here the hitherto silent Merchant’s Guildmaster spoke up.

“I believe we can all accept what the Sorcerer King is saying. It makes perfect sense. I’d do the same in his position, picking the Dwarves over the Quagoa.”

If he commanded an army which could easily annihilate the Quagoa, then helping the Quagoa kill the Dwarves would not offer him a lot of benefits.

“He said he wanted to lend undead workers to us. Wouldn’t taking the mines for his own be more profitable?”

“Well, there would be no point in taking us as slaves. ...Besides, we know the mountain, don’t we?”

“I see. That’s very likely. He feels that exploring the mines by himself would be very troublesome, so he’ll let us excavate the ores. So he’ll give us a pretty collar to please us, then?”

“...Still, after talking to the Sorcerer King, I get the feeling that everything will be alright as long as we trade with him. In other words, he doesn’t intend to exploit us with uneven trade deals?”

“In that case, I can understand why he’s offering such generous terms. Still, wouldn’t it be alright to agree to his proposal?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because we can help each other. As long as the Sorcerer King wants ores, he will protect us. We can think of the Sorcerer King as a mercenary with a huge appetite for wine, in that sense.”

The general opinion had shifted from “dealing with him is dangerous” to “we’ll be safe as long as we have value”. However, during the course of this change, one Dwarf spoke coldly.

“...Do you all intend to be the minions of that undead creature?”

All eyes turned to the man who had been staunchly opposed to Ainz since the beginning — the Forgemaster.

“It’s not a question of good or evil. Right now, our country is in a crisis of survival. If we don’t do something about the Quagoa, we’ll be destroyed for sure.”

“...And our strength alone cannot defeat the Quagoa.”

“Then, how about asking the Empire for help? We’ve had dealings with them for many years. Wouldn’t that be safer? We don’t know anything about the Sorcerous Kingdom, you know.”

“Even if we ask the Empire for help, they’d have no chance against the Quagoa. They’re very tough foes for anyone who uses a weapon. The most important thing is that humans can’t see in the dark and they’re not suitable for underground combat. While they might have a chance if we could lure them to the surface, we have no way of doing so.”

“Then it seems dealing with the Sorcerous Kingdom is our only option. In any case, we’ll start by asking for help, and leave the trade deals for after we’ve seen the Sorcerous Kingdom. What do you think?”

“That might be the safest way of doing it. Still, we’re doing business with them to defeat the Quagoa, right? Then, if we don’t make a deal with them, we’ll need to pay for services rendered, won’t we? ...I don’t even want to think about what kind of price one can put on saving a country.”

The Dwarves were all sour-faced.

“I guess the only way to save the country is to accept his proposal. That means we’ll have to rely on the Sorcerer King’s strength for the next few decades.”

Amidst the murmurs of agreement, the Master of Caves and Mines muttered something along the lines of, “Using undead labor means that they can keep going for all those decades,” but nobody paid too much attention to him. That was because there was another pronouncement which seized their ears.

“You seem to have forgotten something important. I oppose this. I will never let our people go and be his slaves!”

“Slaves?”

“The runesmiths!”

“The Sorcerer King already said they would not be slaves, no?”

“Really?! Do you really believe what he says?!”

Thus rebuked, the Dwarf who asked lowered his head.

“Oi, look. We can’t rule that out.”

Even if everything the Sorcerer King stated was fact, anyone who knew the undead hated the living would not be able to believe it.

“Hostages, then?”

“No. There’d be no need for him to specify runesmiths, in that case. He could just as easily have stated demands for our family members instead.”

“Then, can we refuse the matter of the runesmiths but ask if anything else would serve as payment?”

“...Are there any treasures which might change his mind?”

“No. Although, if we take back the capital and if the treasury is intact, we might be able to pay him with its contents.”

“No, he won’t accept that. We’ll need his strength to take back the Royal Capital, right? If we give it to him under that, what will we say when he asks us, ‘Did you take these treasures from the vaults of the city I took back for you?’ Do you think it would be a good deal if you were in his shoes?’”

“...Frankly speaking, I think it would be fine if we just accepted all his terms.”

The Forgemaster glared at the Merchant’s Guildmaster.

“—Slaves!!”

“That’s just your opinion! The Sorcerer King has already said he won’t take them as slaves! All we need to do is send people over to make sure of that, right? And most importantly… While this might seem a bit much… Runecraft is an outdated technology. Considering it might vanish at any moment, I don’t think it’ll be a problem to hand it over. Pretty cheap for what we’re getting, right?”

“But we’ll lose that entire branch of our craft, don’t you think?”

“Still, now’s the best time to sell it, right?”

“I oppose it!!”

Bubbles formed at the edge of the Forgemaster’s mouth as he shouted.

“Is that the result of logic, and not emotions? Doesn’t look that way to me.”

“I have no idea why you all have so much trust in the Sorcerer King!!”

At this point, the commander-in-chief spoke in cold tones. Having faced the Quagoa in battle, he knew the situation of this city better than anyone else. Therefore, he did not wish to waste words in useless conversation and had stood aside as an observer, but he had finally reached his limit.

“Trust aside, this city will assuredly be destroyed if we do not borrow the strength of the Sorcerer King. What you’re doing is casting aside the single lifeline that we have.”

“What did you say, you whippersnapper?!”

“I’m in charge of this city’s military. And I say that the only way we can protect the city is with His Majesty’s power! Do you want to destroy this city? Otherwise, give me a way to beat the Quagoa without using his strength! You old relic!”

“You! You’ve been calling that monster His Majesty ever since you stepped into this room! Have you betrayed this country?!”

The Forgemaster grabbed the commander-in-chief by the lapels.

“What bullshit is that, you addled old fool? You want a fight?! It’s only natural to refer to someone with such power with terms of respect! You’re the ones who can’t be trusted! He could easily annihilate this country, you know! If you say I betrayed this nation, then you lot are jeopardizing the safety of the people!”

The commander-in-chief seized the Forgemaster by the collar as well, and their foreheads collided.

“Oi! It’s one thing to disagree, but don’t fight!”

The other Dwarves hurriedly rose to separate the pair.

However, the two of them still glared at each other, as though they were getting ready for round two.

“In any case, let’s take a vote. If anyone disagrees, we’ll discuss it later. It’ll be more constructive than a fistfight.”

“What’s the vote about?”

“First, whether we will let the runesmiths go to the Sorcerous Kingdom in order to make use of the Sorcerer King’s power. All in favor, raise your hand.”

Everyone except the Forgemaster raised their hands.

“Mm. Then, the next item. Do we want to forge relations with the Sorcerous Kingdom and begin trade? All in favor, raise your hand.”

The outcome was the same as before.

“I see. Then, the vote concerning the Sorcerer King — His Majesty is decided. Sorry, commander-in-chief, but you can call His Majesty back now.”

Part 2

Ainz and company were once more invited to the Council Chamber. After entering, they saw a single disgruntled Dwarf while the others were brimming with positivity. The commander-in-chief also seemed quite at ease.

In other words, everything had developed as he had hoped for. Ainz smiled inside.

“Please accept our sincere apologies for making you come and go constantly. After our discussions, we have decided to proceed as Your Majesty wishes. To begin with, we will throw ourselves upon Your Majesty’s compassion with regards to the matter of stationing of the forces. After that, we shall open diplomatic relations and begin trade with Your Majesty’s nation. That said, the nature of the trade goods and the methods of the transaction will require further negotiation to work out the minute details.”

“Naturally. In any event, I shall promptly furnish you with the fighting strength needed to retake the fortress and hinder any further Quagoa invasion. I shall send a representative over to handle the finer points of international relationships in a few days, whereupon you may discuss the matter at length.”

Ainz breathed a sigh of relief.

He had to hand tasks like this — which required relevant knowledge — to Albedo. Fortunately, they had not insisted on hashing things out here.

“Then, there is the matter of Your Majesty’s price for the recovery of the Royal Capital; the dispatch of our runesmiths to the Sorcerous Kingdom. We shall pledge that to you. However, we would like to send a group of inspectors to the Sorcerous Kingdom to see how our brethren are being treated, and to ensure their welfare. May we have your permission to do so?”

“Of course. The Sorcerous Kingdom will accept interviews from these inspectors.”

The Dwarves looked much more relieved now.

Did they intend to conduct a workplace inspection? Rather, it seemed more likely that they wanted to see if the Sorcerous Kingdom was adhering to its side of the labor agreement between the two nations.

Typically, labor contracts are never honored. However, I swear I won't let anyone end up like Herohero-san. I'll need to draw up a contract with terms which the Dwarves will respect, let the runesmiths focus on development and the like, among other things.

Ainz nodded to the Dwarves and their concern for their colleagues.

No, all this is thanks to the Quagoa. This situation came about because they conquered the fortress. If they had not picked this time to attack the Dwarven nation, events would not have unfolded so smoothly. Putting on recruitment shows for the runesmith would have taken a lot of time and resources. I almost feel sorry about exterminating the Quagoa now...

One good turn deserved another, after all.

"Then, when does Your Majesty intend to begin the recapture of the Dwarven Kingdom?"

"Umu… As soon as possible."

While it was not likely that the Quagoa who had defeated the Death Knights was a player, he could not rule out a connection entirely. He had to verify this as soon as possible.

"Then, we will place ourselves in your capable hands. To us Dwarves, being able to take back Feoh Berkanan is like a dream come true. I am certain the people will rejoice at Your Majesty's matchless might. It might sound forced, but they do come from the heart."

In other words, if I don't take back the capital, international relations will be very tricky. It's not like they're trying to impose on me, but it does sound very selfish.

"I see. Then, I shall hasten to prepare," Ainz nodded. Then, he thought of something.

“Oh yes, I have a request. I don’t know if you’ll mind.”

“What, what sort of request is that, Your Majesty?”

The Dwarves asked that question nervously. Ainz was confused by their fearful attitude. He had not said anything which should have frightened them. Still worried about whether he had done something strange, he asked:

“I intend to present a gift to a certain Lizardman, and I wish to draw upon the exceptional workmanship of the Dwarves to present him with a suitable set of armor.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from behind him.

“That’s right, Zenberu,” Ainz turned to look behind him, to the Lizardman who was holding his breath. “It is for Zaryusu. Call it a present to celebrate the birth of his child.”

Ainz had spoken of this because he intended to preserve Zaryusu’s life. He would surely father many rare Lizardmen in the future. Thus, presenting him with such excellent armor only made sense.

The Dwarves’ attention turned to the Forgemaster.

He folded his arms in front of him, still frowning at Ainz. He did not seem to approve at all.

“How about it? Can you do it?”

After being questioned again and prodded by the people beside him, the Forgemaster finally nodded, unwillingness written all over his face.

“What are the measurements? We can pay for it.”

“Magical armor ought to resize itself to fit its wearer. Can you enchant it here?”

"I have no confidence in magical matters. You'll have to ask the High Priest about that."

"If you're alright with a low-levelled enchantment, there shouldn't be any problem. Do you not mind, Your Majesty? I believe you should have better enchanters within your domain…"

In truth, there were few skilled enchanters within the Sorcerous Kingdom. Enchanters were essentially specialized magic casters, and they were originally affiliated with the Magician's Guild. However, the Sorcerous Kingdom's Magician's Guild was essentially disbanded.

In addition, Nazarick used a different enchantment process, that of data crystals. He wanted to preserve them as much as possible, given that he could not obtain data crystals in this world. Naturally, nobody in Nazarick could perform the enchantments of this world.

In other words, the Sorcerous Kingdom had no ability to enchant magic items. That said, there was no need to let them know about it.

"If the need arises, all I have to do is reinforce the existing enchantment. In any event, I would like a suit of armor from this city. It will also serve as publicity for Dwarven armorsmithing."

"Ho," The Forgemaster's eyes narrowed. "It should be ready within a week."

"Really now. That would be wonderful. Until then, I shall be engaged in taking back the capital. Well, if the battle ends before it's complete, I might end up waiting around for it in this city."

"Hmph. Then I'll work on it faster."

It was quite clear that he did not mean "it would be a shame to keep you waiting". It was more like "I'll finish it up quick so you don't take too long hanging around in this city."

Why does he hate me so much? I should be a hero to this country, right? Or the liberator who reclaimed their Royal Capital, right? I don't recall doing anything to deserve such resentment… is that it? Is he really just a stubborn old fool?

"Regarding the payment—"

"Like I said just now, there's no charge."

"That settles the price of that particular article. When I talk about payment, I'm referring to the fact that it is both a finished product and a sample. I need you to tell me how much it costs so I can estimate how much it takes to produce this sort of thing."

"...I don't decide the prices. Oi, Merchant's Guildmaster, you're in charge of that."

"...To begin with, we'd have to consider the material of which the armor is made. That would certainly affect the price range…"

"Ah, so it's like that," Ainz replied, trying not to let it show in his attitude. "...So tell me, what's the highest-grade metal in this city?"

If the names of one of the prismatic ores came up, Ainz might well abandon his present negotiations and subjugate the Dwarves by force.

However, his worries were ill-founded.

The metal of which they spoke was adamantite.

"Adamantite, hm? Is there nothing harder than that here? No, even a slightly softer metal would do if it was a rarity in this mountain range."

They could not answer that question either.

There was a possibility that this was classified information and they could not speak openly of it to Ainz. However, direct questioning would not help. Using charm magic to make them talk would leave the memories of being controlled, so if he could not eliminate them afterwards, it was not an option. Sadly, he had no other way to inquire further.

Since Gondo did not know either, he could only pin his hopes on the more senior runemiths.

As Ainz concealed his disappointment, he produced an ingot from beneath his robes.

“Then, we shall supply the metal. Just tell me the processing fee.”

This was a level 45 metal. It was not particularly strong, but it was much stronger than adamantite.

Zaryusu’s defensive abilities would soar if he wore a suit of armor made from this material. It would be enough to protect him from the vast majority of foes in this world.

“And this is…”

Judging by the expression on the Forgemaster’s face as he examined the ingot, Ainz was sure that this ore could not be excavated anywhere near here.

“A wo…”

Ainz shut his mouth just before he could say “worthless”. After all, this was the raw material for a suit of armor he was giving to Zaryusu. He could not say this sort of thing in front of the armorsmith who would be taking on the task.

“It’s a serviceable metal. I have some weapons made of the same material. One moment, please.”

Ainz rose and left the room before looking through his inventory.

After some searching, he withdrew a strange — one of the weapons in YGGDRASIL which had been designed for form over function — shortsword. Then he returned to the room. Frightened by the fact that Ainz was holding a shortsword, the Dwarves shifted uneasily in their seats. Ainz placed the shortsword on the table and slid it over.

Fortunately, it stopped in front of the Forgemaster.

He did not pick up the short sword that slid before him, but instead studied it with a scary look on his face. It must have bothered him in some way.

“This one. Since it’s a short sword, I don’t know if you can use it as a reference for armor… How about it? Can you make it?”

For some reason, those words caused the Forgemaster to flush red.

“I’ll do it and show you!”

Sensing the powerful determination in the Forgemaster’s voice, Ainz nodded.

“Umu. Then, please take care of that. I’d like a suit of chainmail armor, if possible. I’ll lend you the shortsword too; if you need anything else, feel free to let me know. Zenberu, you should be more familiar with Zaryusu. Answer him about his body size, shape and whatnot.”

“I understand, Your Majesty.”

“Then… that’s all for my request. If it’s fine with you, I will excuse myself.”

“Your Majesty, may I ask where you are going?”

“Ahh, commander-in-chief. There was a Dwarf from the southern city whom I rescued, no? I was invited to his home, and I will be a guest there today. ...Let’s leave the welcome reception for later.”

Or rather, Ainz did not want to embarrass himself, so he wanted to avoid such a ceremony. Of course, he did not actually say that.

The commander-in-chief looked a little uneasy.

“I understand Your Majesty’s wishes. However, it would be somewhat distressing if word got out that the savior of our nation had to personally procure accommodations. We have already prepared a high-end room for yourself; would you consider resting there for the day?”

Ainz considered the proposal. The commander-in-chief’s words were acceptable, and there was no reason to refuse.

"Then let us do that. I shall go visit Gondo — the Dwarf who brought me here — and apologize for standing him up."

I trust you won't try to hinder me any further. It would seem the commander-in-chief and the others had no objections either.

Part 3

Another Dwarf came in. He was a runesmith. There were very few people in this city who called themselves runesmiths now, and he was one of them.

The Sorcerer King had given something to Gondo, which he had in turn passed on to all the runesmiths he knew. The results were excellent. Even before the appointed time, nine-tenths of the runesmiths he had approached were already at his atelier cum research lab. There was no doubt that the rest would also arrive early.

"Over here!"

"Oh! Gondo! I'm coming!"

Anticipation was written all over the face of the Dwarf who walked over.

"All right, now give it to me as agreed!"

How many times had those words been repeated up till now? While Gondo found it irritating, he rationalized it away as a form of work, and he gave that Dwarf the same answer he had given all the others:

"The Sorcerer King has something to tell everyone. You'll get it after that."

"What?"

"I told you, didn't I? Before I gave you that small bottle. His Majesty has something to say, and after you listen to the end, you'll get the large bottle."

"Hm, well, that does sound kind of familiar…"

"Alright, if you understand, then sit down over there."

“Umu… Also, ah, Gondo. About that…”

Gondo knew what was coming even without hearing it. Every single smith who had come had said the same thing.

“Nobody else but His Majesty has such wine. Do you understand? Do you understand that such a wine can only be found in his country?”

“Mm, mhm. That’s true. That taste, like joy spreading through your mouth… It glides down the throat, but burns in the gut…”

“Mhm. Alright, if you get it, then sit down over there.”

Gondo pushed the smith — who was imagining delights unseen — in the appropriate direction.

“Come on, don’t be like that. You’ve tasted it before, haven’t you? You understand how I feel, right?”

“I’ve never touched it. I’m not a fan of drinking.”

“Oh, what a waste! Gondo, you’ve missed out on four-fifths of life!”

“Yes, yes, yes, hurry up and sit down. Look, those guys have all drunk it, you should go discuss it with them.”

“Ohhh! Really?!”

The excited smith began running and then suddenly stopped. Then, he turned to look at Gondo. Many of the smiths here had done that too.

“I say, Gondo.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“Really? But…”

“It’s fine. That’s why…”

“...I understand. However, there’s one thing you must remember. You can come to me for help at any time.”

After saying that, the smith moved to sit with the others. Then, he joined their enthusiastic discussion on the joys of alcohol.

Gondo sighed, his heart aching faintly.

The Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown had given Gondo a certain item in order to gather the runesmiths.

That item was wine.

Gondo did not drink, but no Dwarf could resist the taste of delicious wine. Thus, by whetting their appetites with a small sample of exotic alcohol and promising them a large bottle of it later, they should be able to gather about half the smiths. That was what the Sorcerer King had said. However—

Every seat here looked to be filled up.

Gondo sighed again. Personally speaking, he did not want to gather them with such cheap tricks. Instead, he wanted to inflame their pride as craftsmen and have them rally round.

Or rather — that was just Gondo’s selfish wish.

The Sorcerer King had used the quickest and most effective method to gather the smiths. Relying on their pride to bring them together would have wasted a lot of valuable time.

The runesmiths were in dire straits. They had lost the proof that they and their ancestors had existed, while all that lay ahead was darkness. Mired in negativity, it was no wonder that many of them had given up on themselves. Very few Dwarves still called themselves runesmiths and practiced their craft. Most of them had taken down the shingles on their workshops and merely lived day by day of a hopeless, dreamless existence.

Could he have relit the fire in hearts like theirs?

Gondo eagerly looked forward to Ainz and what would happen next.

At the appointed time, Gondo checked the number of Dwarves which had shown up. Every single one was present.

“Well? Ainz-sama asked if he could begin.”

The girl who ran up to Gondo was one of the Sorcerer King’s trusted aides, Aura.

“Oh, can you tell His Majesty that everyone has gathered?”

“Got it~”

The girl ran off. As he watched her leave, Gondo tilted his head.

He was not quite sure what exactly that girl was. Why did that nigh-omnipotent undead lord place so much trust in her? Was she the proof of his friendship with the Dark Elves?

As Gondo pondered this, Ainz Ooal Gown stepped forward on a raised platform. Beside him was the other female who served as his aide.

“Ohhhhhhh!”

“It’s the undead!”

“An enemy?!”

The Dwarves were thrown into chaos. That was only to be expected. The undead were the enemies of all that lived.

“That—”

“—Silence.”

The female — Shalltear Bloodfallen — raised the bottle in her hand.

Everyone’s eyes could pick out the amber radiance within. They were an intensely practical lot, so their attention went to the bottle instead of Ainz’s undead face, and they fell silent.

“Ainz-sama, what is your will?”

“No, there’s nothing. Thank you for your hard work, Shalltear. ...Alright, thank you for coming, everyone. There’s enough wine for everyone, so after this, just take one bottle as you go. Until then, I hope you will keep quiet and listen to me. Of course, if you feel that the words of the undead are not worth listening to, you are free to leave on the spot. Of course, you will not get a bottle of this wine.”

The Sorcerer King swept his gaze across the Dwarves.

Every fiber of his being — from his attitude to his diction and many other things — was certain proof of his overwhelming power. Then there was his haughty, regal bearing which made them instinctively cower before him. It was as though every single joint of his fingers was infused with power.

“Then… I trust there are no objections if I begin speaking?”

The Dwarves nodded in silence.

“Firstly, I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. The domain to the south of this mountain range, beyond the Great Forest of Tob, belongs to me. Being able to meet you esteemed runesmiths delights me from the bottom of my heart. Alright: my words are a very simple proposal, as well as a request. Come to my country. I want to use your runecraft to begin a revolution in magic item enchantment.”

As he heard the Sorcerer King’s words, a spike of pain — born of disappointment and despair — pierced Gondo’s heart.

Gondo shook his head.

He cast away the matter of his father and his grandfather, and looked at the faces of the smiths from the side. They all had bitter expressions on their faces. Their response did not look like it would be positive.

“Forgive me, but I have a question I wish to ask.”

The Dwarf who raised his hand glanced at Gondo.

“Why do you want our craft? Frankly speaking, it’s practically a dying art in this country too.”

The Dwarf who spoke was one of the older smiths present.

“...Simple. I want you to rediscover the lost secrets of your art.”

“Lost?”

Under the runesmiths’ eyes, the Sorcerer King produced a sword from his pocket dimension.

The Dwarves gasped in unison.

It was shock, born of seeing a sword being pulled out of thin air. There was also terror at the sight of the skeletal king, wreathed in unholy light, holding up a blade.

But the reason why Gondo exclaimed despite himself was the same awe which filled every other person here.

It was a black-bladed sword of extraordinary quality. The unbelievably fine edge practically shone with magical radiance.

“Such an… An amazing sword…”

“Incredible… I’ve never seen anything like it in my life…”

“Is this the sword from Dwarven mythology?”

“Ohhh! What, what a beautiful sight this is...”

The Sorcerer King raised the sword, as though to show it to the Dwarves. Gondo’s eyes instinctively followed its glow as well.

“Alright, gentlemen, please pay attention to the body of the sword.”

Gondo followed where the Sorcerer King was pointing, and cried out. So did the other smiths.

There were 20 purple runes carved upon it.

However, only Gondo noticed that one of the runes on the sword was the same as the one which the Sorcerer King had described during their encounter in the tunnel.

I see. So that’s why he knew so much about runes.

He must have gained that knowledge from careful study of that sword.

“Then, I wish to ask you gentlemen. There are 20 runes on this sword; is such a thing possible?”

The answer went without saying — it was impossible. Nobody here could do it, no matter how hard they tried. And then, there was this sword, which seemed to exist only to mock their inability to do so.

The smiths rose from their seats, each with a raging inferno in their eyes. There was a passion in them which had not been there when they were talking about drinks. Then, the crowd surged forward like a horde of zombies pouncing on the living, to the feet of the Sorcerer King.

“Let me see!”

“Please! Let me touch it!”

“I might learn something! I beg you!”

“Insolence!”

The silver-haired girl glared at the encroaching dwarves with a frightening look in her eyes. The Dwarves froze for an instant, as though impaled by a fear which cut like icy blades. And then —

“—You’re being too noisy. Quiet down.”

There was no doubt that they stood in the presence of a true ruler.

His aura was one of a leader that was utterly confident of his position. Then again, it might have been because he was a peerless master of death.

Gondo had known this ever since he had met Ainz in that tunnel, but Ainz had not revealed that side of himself back then. It must have been an act to keep Gondo from shrinking away in fear. This must be the true nature of the Sorcerer King.

I can’t tell his expression, but he seems pleased. It must be because everyone’s moving as he planned.

“A moment, good smiths. Please hear me out to the end. After that, you may touch it directly. I will not continue until you are seated, and neither will you be able to obtain this sword.”

Dejected — cowed by his air of sovereign power — the smiths returned to their places.

“Thank you. Then, I shall pick up from where I left off. My question still stands — is a sword with 20 runes carved upon it within your abilities?”

Everyone looked to the oldest and most experienced of the smiths. He shook his head powerlessly and replied:

“It is not. To the best of my knowledge, I have only ever heard of six.”

A torrent of questions erupted.

“What? Six? I’ve only ever heard of five!”

“...Is that so. It seems few know of this, but 200 years ago, the hammer which the king bore had six runes carved upon it. That was the secret treasure of the runesmith’s art.”

Gondo recalled his grandfather.

He thought of the face of a runesmith from 200 years ago, a man who was a veteran of weapon-forging.

“Ohhhh! Is that the warhammer which could shake the earth? I think I heard of it in a song once…”

“Correct. Even the runesmiths — hailed as geniuses and prodigies — of that time could not produce a weapon with 20 runes on it…”

“I see. So this must be a weapon made with lost techniques, then.”

“Hm? Do you not know either, Your Majesty?”

“I am not sure how this sword was made. In all honesty, it is merely my possession. And… its creators are no longer in this world.”

“By that you mean… More valuable techniques were lost, then?”

Pain filled the faces of the smiths. Gondo felt the same way as well.

“Because of that—”

Everyone looked up at the Sorcerer King’s words.

“Because of that, I want to revive those techniques. Thus, I need your strength. I want you to make something like this sword, no matter the cost.”

Silence descended.

Needless to say, it was because they were all aware of how close to impossible this task was.

Even the most skilled of the runesmiths present had strained themselves to carve four runes at once. The Sorcerer King was asking for five times that amount. However, none of them said “it’s impossible”. They had their pride as craftsmen, and after seeing the masterpieces of a prior artisan, they could not bring themselves to deny it.

That sword is like a challenge from the smiths of old to the smiths of today, Gondo thought.

“I want to make it.”

Someone whispered those words.

Soon, that voice was not alone.

“Me too.”

“I want to try it.”

“Mm, I want to show the world what a real legend looks like.”

“No, I’ll be the one who’ll be hailed as a legend.”

“What nonsense is that. I’m the one who will bear that heavy burden.”

The sound of a applause rang through the air. Its source was the Sorcerer King upon his stage. Although they did not know how he had done it with his bony hands, it was said that all things were possible for a magic caster.

“Marvellous. However, can you do so by yourselves? Can you raise your voices and speak your challenge to a legend? It might be possible. It might not. Thus, I hope you will come to my country and devote your lives to creating new techniques.”

Silence descended once more.

Gondo was very aware of their feelings.

The Sorcerer King was offering these people — who were keenly aware that their art was practically extinct in the Dwarven nation — a shining opportunity within the palm of his outstretched hand.

Should they not bet their lives on this challenge?

"All right then, I will entrust this sword to you."

The Sorcerer King stepped off the stage, presenting its hilt to one of the aged smiths. Perhaps it was coincidence, or perhaps he had researched it beforehand, but the man to whom he presented it was considered a genius second only to Gondo's own late father, and his voice carried much weight among the runesmiths.

He did not reach out for it.

It was only natural to be confused when presented with such a mighty blade.

"Is, is it alright? Is it alright to hand such a powerful — a weapon which I may never see again in all my life to someone like me?"

"Right now, you are not Dwarves tempted by wine, but runesmiths who wish to take up a challenge. I can place my trust in that. In addition, I will be leaving this city for a while. Thus, I am simply lending it to you."

The Dwarf straightened himself up.

"...I see. Then, please permit me to borrow it, Your Majesty."

He bowed deeply, and received the sword with the utmost respect.

"Still, I have to say that I do not quite understand the techniques of runecraft. Is it possible to carve runes upon a blade and then further enchant it with magic?"

"It doesn't work that way, Your Majesty. Runes are characters imbued with mana. Thus, carved runes and enchantments are mutually repulsive. If a powerful magic caster tries an enchantment, the runes will distort."

"Is that so…"

"Incidentally, when you say you will be leaving Feoh Gēr, where will you be heading?"

"Ah, I will be going to your former Royal Capital."

The Dwarves groaned all at once.

He could hear them say things like "That ruined—" "To such a dangerous place—" "Where the Quagoa still rule"

Gondo knew that much, but there was a message within them which he could not overlook.

"They say there are three trials awaiting those who wish to go there from this place. Will it be alright?"

"The three hazards, said to be impassable. Even if you make it past the first of them… the Maze of Death is impenetrable."

All the speakers were elder Dwarves. As expected of those who were old and full of years, it would seem they knew things even Gondo did not. It might be best to ask them about it and inform the Sorcerer King.

The runesmith who had straightened himself up gave his counsel to the Sorcerer King.

"Your Majesty, that place should be the lair of a gigantic Dragon. That lord of the Frost Dragons, the White Dragon Lord, might be in residence. He was the reason for the destruction of Feoh Tiwaz. I know Your Majesty is possessed of great power, but in my humble opinion, that Dragon Lord is equally powerful. I pray you will take care of yourself."

"...A Dragon, then. Indeed, it would make for a very interesting opponent. Then I shall proceed with the greatest of caution and deal with it carefully."

After that, there were several more simple questions, and the meeting was dissolved. This was because everyone realized that the sooner it ended, the more time the Sorcerer King would have to take back their capital. *They couldn't bear to get in the way of that,* Gondo thought.

Or perhaps, they wanted to inspect the sword they had received.

Gondo did not know which answer was correct, but given the inferno in the eyes of the Dwarven artisans, it was probably the latter.

◆ ◆ ◆

The desire to shout “Yahoo!” filled Ainz.

He had felt that way ever since he had finished his presentation. It was no different from when he had been Suzuki Satoru. Whether he had succeeded or failed, he wanted to cry out as he basked in the feeling of liberation and relief.

“That was amazing, Ainz-sama! You really got that lot all fired up!”

“That was truly incredible. The only person in Nazarick who could do that is you, Ainz-sama!”

Ainz resisted the urge to go, “Ah, no~” in embarrassment as Aura and Shalltear praised him. Perhaps if they were Demiurge or Albedo, he might peek at them while wondering if they were mocking him. But since it was Aura and Shalltear, he could take their words at face value. Perhaps if he was Suzuki Satoru, he might even say, “I’m beat, want to grab a drink?” and head toward a vending machine, but the man who ruled Nazarick and the Sorcerous Kingdom could not say such things.

“—Hm, well, it was nothing much. I’m sure Demiurge or Albedo could do a better job.”

“Certainly not!”

“Yup yup! Even those two couldn’t play those Dwarves that well!”

Ainz did not feel that way, but he had not expected the situation to develop this well. And then, the creeping feeling of guilt over whether this success was a good thing began creeping up on him.

Naturally, the sword he had shown the Dwarves was an item from YGGDRASIL.

YGGDRASIL did not have a rune system. Then again, it might have existed within the game's data, but it had not been discovered by anyone until the very end. Therefore, the runes carved on that sword were merely cosmetic — for decoration.

At first, he had thought, maybe they might get interested if they saw this sword. But he had been caught completely off guard by the intensity of their reaction, to the point where he kind of regretted saying that he wanted them to make a sword like that.

However, Ainz tamped down that feeling.

He had to strengthen the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. Since a foe with a World-Class Item might appear in the future, and there might be hidden players out there fighting him, he had to increase their combat strength.

Ainz looked at Shalltear.

She was a Vampire girl who seemed to be blushing in embarrassment — which was actually quite surprising when he thought about it. She was a seed Peroroncino had left behind. And she was the first NPC he had no choice but to kill with his own two hands.

His emotion suppression cancelled out the surge of hatred that followed, but even so, he could not forget it. He could not forget the shadow of the holder of the World-Class Item that had made him do such a thing.

In order to reach his goal, even making people miserable with lies was hardly worthy of consideration. The most important thing in this world was the residents of Nazarick. All other lives were two or three rungs below them.

Equality of lives was nothing more than a madman's ravings.

If all life was equal, then he would like to put a man who tortured people to death in one electric chair and a champion of said equality in another, and then make the latter decide which of them should die. Anyone who could actually say that they could entrust their fate to a roll of the dice was a true believer.

However, Ainz would kill the former without hesitation. This was because Ainz knew that lives were not equal. There was no comparing the lives of the NPCs within Nazarick to the lives of the people outside it.

“That’s Ainz-sama for you!”

“You’re right!”

Before he could finish his train of thoughts, the praise of Aura and Shalltear stabbed at his heart. In any case—

“Don’t say they were ‘played’. I merely told them the truth.”

He had said that to them for the sake of Gondo, who should have been behind him.

However, when there was no response from behind, a somewhat puzzled Ainz turned around.

Gondo padded closer, prepared to send Ainz off.

“...What is it, Gondo?”

Upon being addressed, Gondo raised his head.

“...Your Majesty. Since you said all that to them, am I to take it that the Council approved of sending over the runesmiths?”

“Indeed. They did say they would also send an inspection team in the future to see if they were being treated as slaves, but fundamentally, they agreed to do so.”

“Is that so… So did those great people really feel that runecraft was no longer necessary?”

Gondo’s tears flowed down his cheeks

Ainz was shocked, Outside of childhood, a man’s tears were a rare thing.

Those tears must have been shed because he had learned that the art which he admired and which he took such pride in had been judged worthless and abandoned by his country.

But was that really the case, Ainz thought. Given the Dwarven nation's circumstances, it would be very hard for them to refuse the request of a nation who had pledged to send them reinforcements.

The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. That was a truth among nations.

Even Ainz would kill hundreds of millions of people for Nazarick.

Still, there was no need to tell Gondo any of this.

"Indeed, Gondo. This country seems to view its runesmiths as disposable. They handed them over with hardly any resistance when I asked for them."

Gondo, as well as the runesmiths who might hear of this from him, had to abandon their country to some extent. While it was very difficult to completely forsake the land of one's birth, it was still a necessary step to have them devote their utmost loyalty to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Ainz gently patted Gondo's shoulder.

"However, the same is not true of me. I sense potential from the runesmiths."

Even if Gondo's dreams could not be realized, monopolizing these skilled people and using their research might allow him to develop a countermeasure against enemies with runic weapons.

Knowledge was power.

"...Even if you're discarded by one country, it's not over as long as another one needs you, don't you think?"

Ainz patted Gondo's shoulder several times. Gondo wiped his face clumsily.

“...Thank you very much, Your Majesty. Please allow me to meet your expectations with all my strength.”

“Umu, umu. I shall look forward to it.”

Ainz smiled — although his face did not move — as though to say, “I trust you.”

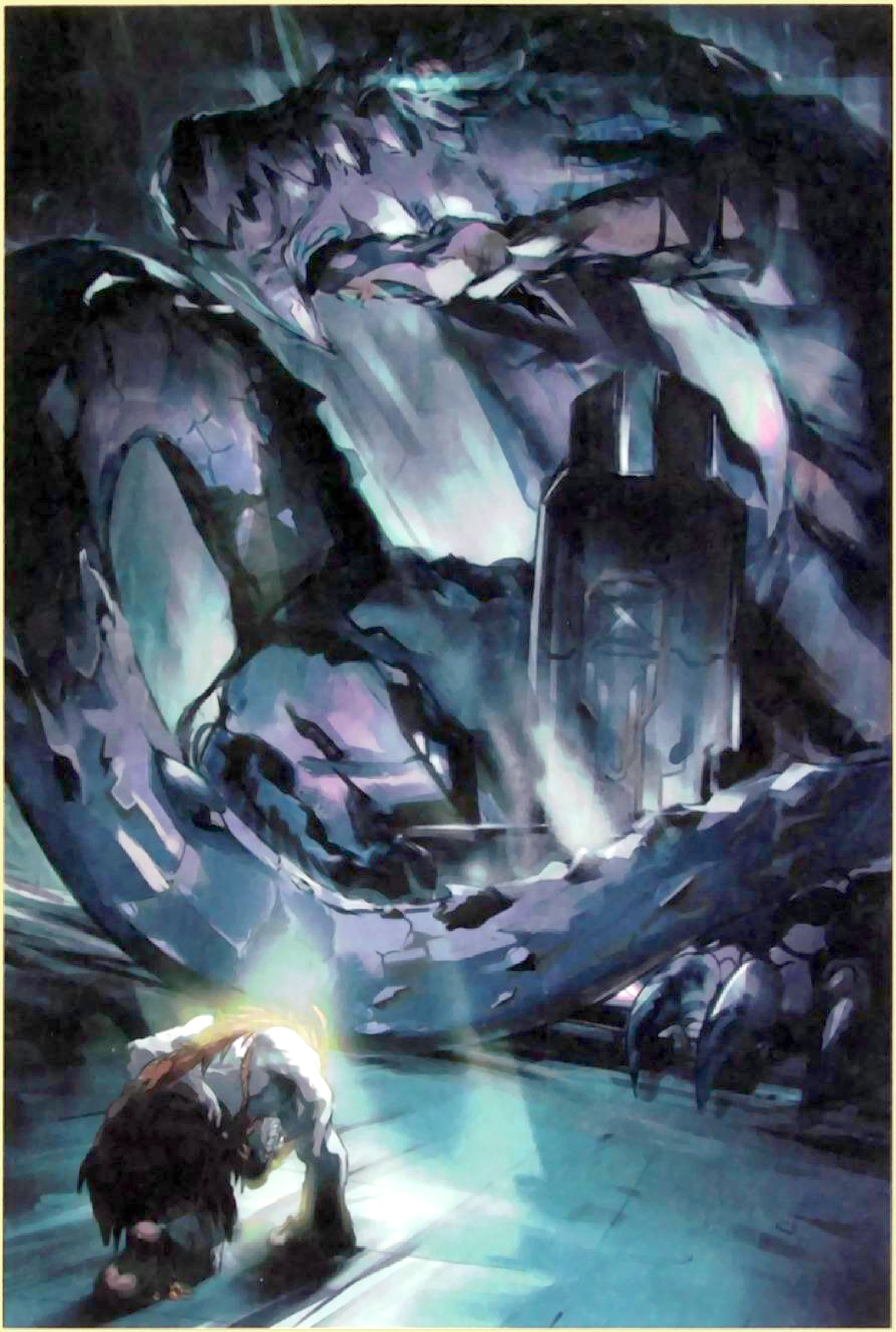
Then again, Ainz had been thinking.

It would be good if he could learn about the Dwarven Capital. He would probably need to have Gondo do some legwork to obtain more information. And then, he had to speak to the commander-in-chief.

Dragons in YGGDRASIL could live forever. It would not be strange for them to be individuals of unimaginable power. So in all likelihood there’ll be a Frost Dragon waiting for me...

Suddenly, the face of a young man — no, a young woman appeared from within his memories.

“Come to think of it, she did say she wanted to help me learn more about them… What a shame.”



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OVERLORD VOLUME 11

CHAPTER 5

FROST DRAGON LORD

Part 1

It was the next morning. Ainz had decided to set out early to take back the former Dwarven Capital, Feoh Berkanan, but just as he was about to leave, a familiar face appeared at the door.

It was Gondo.

Ainz tilted his head. He had no idea why he might be here.

"—Are you here to send me off?"

"No, I have come to lead the way."

Ainz blinked. Granted, he *had* mentioned that he would need a Dwarf to show him the way. Judging by how the Council had immediately complied with the request, Ainz surmised that this Dwarf's mission would be to keep an eye on him, so he thought that they might select an unrelated Dwarf.

"After parting ways with you yesterday, I heard many things from the other runesmiths. I feel that I know the route to the Royal Capital better than any other Dwarf."

"Then, can you find an alternate route if the tunnel to the Capital collapses? You may need to adapt to changes in the situation as they come up. Is that alright?"

"I've studied up as much about them as I could. Please allow me to guide you."

"Umu."

Ainz began to think.

In truth, bringing Gondo along carried more demerits than merits. However, if the Council had approved, then if Ainz was the only one who disapproved and requested a change, the chances of him getting someone else as a guide would be very low.

"...Are you a warrior, or do you have some way to fight?"

"No, I don't. I have no confidence in my skills pertaining to that field. However, I am prepared to face any danger, and nobody will blame you if I perish. In addition, I have my father's cloak. That was also a reason why they chose me."

The cloak of invisibility lent a lot of weight to his argument.

While Ainz had planned to protect his guide anyway, he felt uneasy about bringing along a Dwarf with no combat ability. And while he could still resurrect him with magic even if he died (provided he had sufficient levels), Gondo might have the mindset of "it's all over" if he died.

"Do you need to verify if I've chased all the Quagoa out of the Royal Capital? If you die along the way, it'll make things very difficult for me… and then there's the matter of the runesmiths. I'd much rather you stayed here."

Gondo slowly approached Ainz and quietly said:

"The Royal Capital has a vast treasury. If it hasn't been plundered yet, then it will contain many Dwarven treasures. There should also be some of my father's weapons and technical manuscripts from the royal family in there. Who knows, there might even be secret manuals left behind by runesmiths of the past."

"Hoh…"

With that response, Ainz indicated that Gondo should continue.

"I wish to secretly obtain them. ...While it seems rude to ask this of Your Majesty, may I please ask you to turn a blind eye to this when you retake the Capital?"

"...Before that, do you have any way to open the Treasury?"

"No. However… I believe Your Majesty should be able to do something about that, right?"

Does he really think I can do anything?

"So you want me to become an accomplice to a petty thief?"

"I believe the correct explanation of what would happen is that Your Majesty wished to see if the Treasury had been burgled, and thus opened it to check. Then, you were briefly distracted, for just long enough. I would be that petty thief, bearing no relation to Your Majesty."

"...The line of Dwarven royalty has been severed. Is that correct? Is there a ledger recording the treasures that should be within the vaults?"

"I am afraid there is none."

"It is very important to make sure of that. It would be very dangerous if there was a record, you know? I cannot approve of this. ...More importantly, does that treasure not belong to your country? Does it not shame you to steal it?"

Gondo laughed scornfully.

"Well, those manuals don't mean anything to a country that gave us and runecraft up, don't you think?"

It's treason, then? Though that thought passed through Ainz's head, the truth was that it did him no harm. On the contrary, letting these books languish in the Dwarven nation would be a waste.

More to the point, Gondo's theft would completely break his ties to the Dwarven Kingdom. The Dwarven Kingdom would not tolerate a criminal who had looted their treasury. This matter could be used as a form of blackmail, and it would become a shackle that would render Gondo completely incapable of betraying the Sorcerous Kingdom.

However, it could also be used against Ainz in a similar manner.

“...Indeed. There’s no point in letting people who don’t need it have it either. Indeed, it might be that my eyes might fail me at that time. Still, like I mentioned earlier, you need to search out any catalogues of the treasures. I’d like to avoid any future disputes.”

“Understood. I shall do as Your Majesty commands.”

“Then, we’ll leave matters at that.”

While they had walked some distance away to discuss this, someone with keen hearing might be eavesdropping on them.

“Then, let’s change the topic. Tell me about the hazards we might face before reaching the Dwarven Capital. A basic outline is fine.”

“A good question. All who wish to reach the Dwarven Capital must pass three trials.”

“Trials? Interesting. Summarize them.”

“Mm, the first trial is the Great Rift. There is a slope ahead of the gate that leads to the fortress. After the fortress is the Great Rift that splits the earth. Now that the suspension bridge has been strung, it hardly qualifies as a trial. However, when crossing it, one must prepare oneself to receive concentrated attacks from the enemy.”

“Do the Quagoa use ranged weapons?”

“Umu, I haven’t heard of that before. However, it might be dangerous to assume they don’t, right?”

It made a lot of sense. The possibility also existed that they could use the magic weapons from the fortress.

“Then, the next trial is an area of flowing lava. Even the heated air alone can be fatal. One must cross it via a narrow path of trimmed rock. There have also been sightings of a huge monster there from time to time.”

“A monster, you say?”

The form of Guren, Area Guardian of the 7th Floor, came to mind.

If the monster was similar to it, things would be very troublesome indeed.

...Come to think of it, Slimes and human society are quite closely linked. Is it the case in this country as well? If they have rare slimes here, I’d like to bring them home.

Just as Ainz thought of the slimes that lived near the sewer filters, Gondo moved on to the last trial.

“The final trial is the Maze of Death. It is a cave with countless branches, filled with poisonous vapors. If one inhales those vapors, their limbs will be paralyzed and their hearts will stop beating.”

Gondo looked towards Aura and Shalltear.

That gesture seemed to be saying that Ainz might be fine, but those two would be in trouble.

They’ll be fine… Well, I guess I can tell him when we get there.

“And what is the right path through the caves?”

“Regretfully, I do not know. I looked through all my connections, but even the elders did not know. Neither did the members of the Council. Perhaps it might be recorded in an archive...:”

“But you didn’t find it either, did you? Well, I doubt you’d be able to easily locate a document that was so critical to national security. We’ll gather information when the time comes and adapt to the situation.”

Ainz committed the information about these trials to memory, and gestured to the others.

“Let’s go, then.”

Ainz, Shalltear and Aura took the lead. Gondo lined up with ten or so soldiers and their commander on their way to retake the fortress, and then the gates slowly opened. The stench of death filtered through the gap, so they had an idea what to expect, but then a gruesome scene revealed itself to all present.

The gentle tunnel which sloped down was broad and it had been levelled for easier passage. However, the walls and floor were covered in blood, guts and chunks of meat. Quagoa corpses littered the ground.

“Urk!”

The stench of gore, offal death filled the room. It was too much for Gondo, who had no experience as a warrior, and he began retching. The Dwarven soldiers’ faces had turned green, and not because of any trick of the light.

Ainz’s body had no concept of nausea, so it did not cause him any problems. However, he did not enjoy this smell.

A squelching noise came from underfoot. It would seem he had stepped on the innards which had fallen out of a bisected Quagoa.

Ainz sighed and then cast [Mass Fly], allowing everyone to take flight.

It would seem the Death Knights had revelled in their carnage here. Anyone who slipped and fell in this tunnel of blood would surely lose their strength to the filth and the stench. More importantly, the sight of someone lurching around beside them while covered in blood was a gruesome one.

The group descended the sloping passage, unblemished due to the flight spell.

Thanks to the dimly glowing rocks embedded along the way, there was still some light to see by. However, the space between each rock was filled with darkness. Of course, Ainz possessed darkvision, and it posed no problems to him.

After going down the slope — a distance of about 100 meters — they could see the entrance to the fortress before them. No, it would be more accurate to say that it was the fortress' back door.

Once they passed through the opened doors into the fortress, they could go beyond the fortress and cross the suspension bridge ahead. After travelling west from there for several days, they should be able to see the former Dwarven Capital.

The Fortress' entrance was littered with Quagoa corpses. Some of them looked like they had not been killed by the Death Knights, but gnawed. Those must have been the victims of the Death Knights' zombies.

Ainz's undead detection did not pick up any contacts. It was probably because the zombies had reverted to regular corpses after the Death Knights were destroyed.

Ainz looked around. There were no undead reactions now, but if he left them like this, things might become dangerous, given the characteristics of this world's undead.

"It is commonly accepted that leaving corpses untended will result in undead spawning. What do you plan to do?" Ainz asked the soldiers who had been following them.

"Yes, sir. We will clean them up," the commander answered. "Well, we say clean, but it's more like dumping them into the Great Rift in a place where it won't matter even if we attract a monster."

"And after that, you'll need to repair the fortress, and then find out how the Quagoa attacked? It seems you have a lot of work ahead of you."

They would part ways here. The only people who would be taking part in the reclamation of the Dwarven Capital were Ainz, Aura, Shalltear and Gondo. Well, the Hanzos were around as well, but they did not need to know that.

The Dwarves smiled bitterly. While it was true that the investigations were risky — they ran the risk of encountering Quagoa, after all — it was nothing compared to Ainz’s task of attacking the Quagoa main camp. That was probably what they meant.

“Then, we’ll enter the fortress. We will go in first to ensure it is safe, so wait outside until then. To be on the safe side, could you protect Gondo?”

After the commander replied in the affirmative, Ainz stepped through the open door.

As he stood at the center of the tragedy, Ainz asked Aura (who was standing behind him) a question.

“Aura, can you sense anyone using a stealth ability to hide here?”

“Nope. There’s nothing alive in this fortress.”

Aura put her hand on a long ear, and made a listening gesture as she answered. If Aura the ranger said so, then there would be nothing living within this fortress.

Still, they could not lower their guard.

The person who had defeated Ainz’s Death Knights should have passed through here. If that person had taken a lot of stealth-specialized classes, they might be able to deceive Aura’s perceptive abilities.

Still, anyone like that would generally have poor attack power, and they would be easy to deal with even if they launched an ambush.

There were many corpses within the fortress, but unlike the sloping passage from earlier, there were Dwarven corpses everywhere.

Ainz passed through the fortress and towards the gate which was opposite the one through which they had entered. After opening the gate, he saw the Great Rift yawning before him, and not even Ainz’s vision could see its bottom.

Since there were no Quagoa beyond, it would seem they had retreated without setting up a base of operations here..

“This should be the Great Rift…”

Ainz turned to look from left to right.

“But there doesn’t seem to be anything like a suspension bridge here… no, is that a bridge stump? If that’s there, then that means…”

“It might be that the the enemy destroyed the bridge during their retreat,” Shalltear said from the side.

“Hm…”

If their enemy was a powerful being who could easily defeat a Death Knight, was there a need to destroy the bridge? If this was meant to block their attack, that meant that they were not confident in their strength — No.

Ainz shook his head.

Death Knights were rare in this world. Thus, the enemy must have surmised there was a powerful entity controlling the two Death Knights. That being the case, losing the bridge would not be a big loss.

“Not bad… Tell the Dwarves that the path is safe.”

“Understood!”

As he watched Shalltear head towards the Dwarves, he saw Aura squatting down. He wanted to ask what she was doing, but given her diligent expression, it would be best not to interrupt her focus.

Ainz turned to look at the Great Rift, then picked up a stone and threw it in. There was no particular meaning to it; he had done so on a whim. Still, he could not hear the stone striking the bottom.

“Its depth is unknown, Your Majesty,” said the commander whom Shalltear had brought back with her. He must have seen what Ainz was doing. “We’ve sent two expeditions to investigate, but neither of them came back.”

"I see. There were probably monsters there. ...Have those things ever come out?"

"Sir, there hasn't been anything like that to date. Therefore, we decided not to send in expeditions. Probing too deep would be unwise."

"Well, that's right."

Ainz could make incorporeal undead like ghosts, and by using magic to share their senses, he would be able to mount a full investigation. However, now was not the time for that sort of thing.

Given the present circumstances, investigating the Great Rift was a low priority. Still, it had to be done. In YGGDRASIL, places like this often concealed valuable items or dungeons.

If the shitty devs had their way, they'd hide a tunnel at the bottom of the Great Rift, and there'd be rare ores inside that tunnel. No, they'd definitely do that. In fact, it's happened before.

"—Then, we shall cross to the other side, pursue the fleeing Quagoa, and press them back into the Royal Capital, then."

The flight spell was still in effect, so that was not a problem in itself. However, what worried Ainz was whether or not something would crawl out of the darkness.

It was an incident from YGGDRASIL, but Ainz could not help but recall the time when he had been crossing a lake and spotted a giant serpent-like monster swimming below. It was not a pleasant memory, but that experience had been put to use in the creation of the 5th Floor—

After bidding the commander farewell, the four of them took flight, with Shalltear and Aura looking out below them. His worries from just now were ill-founded, and they reached the other side without seeing anything else below.

That said, he breathed a quiet sigh of relief when his feet were once again firmly planted on *terra firma*. Granted, he had to keep it secret from the others.

Ainz surveyed his surroundings.

There were only four enemy corpses here, which meant that the Death Knights had been defeated in this place.

“Shalltear, there are a few things I need to tell you now.”

After calling Shalltear to him, Ainz glanced at Aura, and saw her inspecting the ground.

Perhaps it would be better to call Aura over as well. He thought that, but then he mused that he wanted to have Shalltear take the lead this time round. He could explain a simplified version to Aura afterwards.

“Hang on a bit, Ainz-sama!”

Shalltear took out a notebook and flipped it open.

“Please, go on.”

“Oh. Umu. A notebook, huh… Very attentive of you. Ahem! Er— we are now about to enter a very dangerous area. As for why it is dangerous, that’s because there is a being who can defeat two of my Death Knights. While comparing Death Knights to you is something of an insult—”

“—It’s nothing of the sort, Ainz-sama. I will use my full strength to do battle with any powerful being who could defeat the Death Knights you created.”

“No, you must not use your full strength.”

“Why, why is that? If the enemy is strong, shouldn’t I attack in earnest — forgive me for asking such a question of you, Ainz-sama!”

“Not at all. Your question is very sensible.”

Ainz put his hands behind his back, and then told her how to deal with an unknown enemy.

“That said, you must be aware of how the opposition expects us to act. What the enemy wants most is information — our fighting ability, in other words. They might use expendable ambush troops and the like to gauge our combat strength. In other words, they will verify our abilities and when they feel they can achieve victory, they will attack us in such a way that they cannot lose and we cannot flee.”

“To think they would actually do that…”

“Granted, we don’t know if the enemy will go that far—”

“Ah... Ainz-sama...”

Aura called to him in a nervous tone, something which was very unusual for her. Under normal circumstances, he would stop his explanation to Shalltear and listen to Aura.

However, he was in a very good mood since this was a chance to speak at length about one of his specialties.

Therefore, Ainz turned to Aura and put his index finger to his mouth.

“Ah, yes!”

Understanding dawned on Aura. Ainz was giving an earnest lecture, so he wanted her to be quiet. She understood what Ainz was trying to say.

“Like I was saying, Shalltear. I would do the same thing if I were fighting a strong foe. No, my friends would do the same as well.”

“The Supreme Beings would do that too? But, comparing this enemy to the Supreme Beings is a little…”

“Really? You should assume that the enemy can do everything I can do. Only a fool thinks that they are special and gets full of themselves. Remain ever-cautious. In any case, I do not wish to let the enemy see our full fighting strength."

Keeping the Hanzos in hiding was also to disrupt the schemes of the enemy.

"Therefore, Shalltear, I will lay several restrictions on you when you are travelling with me to the Dwarven Capital — before we reach the enemy's headquarters."

"Yes! What sort of restrictions are these?"

"Umu. Concerning magic… while I permit you to use spells of up to the 10th tier, you are not to use too many different spells. At the very most, limit yourself to one or two of them."

"...I see, this is to deceive the enemy and make them overconfident, and then defeat him with a counterattack. That being the case… why not limit me to 5th-tier magic or lower?"

"No, the enemy will not be lulled into a false sense of confidence that way. In the moment that the enemy thinks they have the measure of our true strength and seeks to utterly destroy us, we have a chance to strike a fatal blow to the enemy. In my case, if I saw the enemy attack me with just a few techniques and no spells beyond the 5th tier, I would immediately conclude that the enemy was trying to keep their abilities a secret."

"In that kind of situation, what would you do against that sort of enemy?"

"I'd think of how to learn more about them. For instance, I'd briefly abandon an expendable base. Then, I'd slowly gather intelligence. Once the enemy gains a base, they'll feel the desire to hang on to it. That sort of attitude will limit the enemy's actions, and they'll invariably reveal their true colors."

"Is there a need to be that cautious?"

In a game, one could still recover from a loss. However, in this world, there was the chance that they would not be able to bounce back. This was especially true when it came to Ainz, who had not yet finished his experiments on player deaths.

"All these are things you do in response to the circumstances. Shalltear, you need to think, no?"

In any event, he should leave things at that. Ainz turned towards Aura.

"Then, Aura, what is it?"

"No, it's nothing."

Aura's eyes were sparkling.

He had no idea what had brought that on, but perhaps she had felt impressed by the tactics he had explained to Shalltear.

Hm~ it might be the absolute basics, but I guess I should give Aura some guidance too, no? Should I lend out that book of PK tactics? But that's the only thing I have which gives me a leg up on the NPCs… What should I do. Also, letting information spread too widely isn't good, someone told me that before...

Just as Ainz fell into thought, Gondo spoke up.

"Ah, I'm sorry to interrupt you while you're discussing strategy, but shouldn't we move forward? If the path collapses, we'll have to find another route."

"That's true… Shall we travel by magical beast?"

"It might be better not to. We might encounter small passages along the way, and if we're mounted, we'll have to leave the beasts there."

He had thought of using a ridable undead creature like a Soul Eater. He could simply re-create one if there were any problems. However, it would be wiser to listen to the words of his guide.

"I understand. Let's go, then."

◆ ◆ ◆

"His Majesty has set out!"

As they heard this, six of the Dwarven Councillors — the High Priest of Earth, the Director of Food Production, the Cabinet Secretary, the Brewmaster, the Master of Caves and Mines, and the Merchant's Guildmaster — shivered in delight.

It was true that the Sorcerer King had not done anything so far. Still, they could not rest at ease when an undead being — one who hated the living — of such power walked the streets.

The people here were gathered to ensure the safety of the city and its people. Thus, they had to consider the worst possible scenarios that might result before committing to a course of action. For instance, the Sorcerer King might have suddenly turned violent and begun massacring children. These worries plagued them all day, and they considered various countermeasures and useful proposals.

Now that the object of their whispered discussion was no longer here, what was wrong in savoring the sweet release from their burdens?

"Bring the wine! Bring the wine!"

Just as the parched earth craved the rain, alcohol was essential for exhausted hearts to heal.

Nobody could possibly object to that.

"Still, he'll be back, right?"

The air turned stagnant all of a sudden, and a gloom settled across all of them.

Their pumped fists sank powerlessly down.

"Should we run?"

“Where can we go? If we flee after signing that pact with him… Also, we asked him to reclaim the Royal Capital for us, right? If we were in his place, wouldn’t we be angry at this?”

“Well, he might get angry… but I wouldn’t have the confidence to take a hardline stance against a being like that.”

“Ah. Yes, I understand how you feel.”

“...Is that really alright? What happened to your pride, Merchant’s Guildmaster?”

“Ah, it’s not as though we could make a fair deal with such a thing, right? Generally speaking, deals can only be made between two equal parties in equal circumstances, right? Therefore, it’s *de facto* impossible to make a proper deal with someone who’s far more powerful than you.”

The Dwarves sighed as one.

Nobody here felt that the Sorcerer King would fail to reclaim the Royal Capital. That much was obvious just by glancing at the magical beasts he left behind. And then, he was a person who had the luxury of leaving behind monsters like that when he knew there was a Dragon waiting for him.

“Then, let’s change the subject. Can anyone estimate when he’ll return?”

“How would we know? It’s not as though we can ask the man himself. If he chuckled and said ‘Right now’, I’m pretty sure I’d piss myself.”

Those were shameful words, but none of the Dwarves laughed at them.

“...It can’t be helped. If he did that to me, I’d piss myself too.”

“Same here. I might even shit my pants.”

They looked at each other as they uttered those crudities.

“Have we learned anything new? Do we know anything about that Gondo?”

"Nothing at all, only that he gathered the runesmiths."

"The runesmiths? Was it about going to the Sorcerous Kingdom?"

"Who knows? Why don't we summon one of them and ask him about it?"

"That's a good idea, but it'll tip our hand to His Majesty, no? It's too dangerous to act rashly. Only an idiot would touch a heated crucible, after all."

"If that's the case, then we'll have to tell the runesmiths that we want them to go to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Then we can casually ask them about it. How about that?"

"...I'm not confident in my ability to do so."

The Dwarves murmured, "Me too" in response.

"Alright, then let's forget about asking them. It would be foolish to dig needless holes and end up falling to our deaths."

Everyone here agreed with that. If they angered Ainz by prying too deeply, many lives might be lost.

"Then, let's inform the two of us who aren't here about tomorrow's business and not to interfere with the smiths. I heard the commander-in-chief will be coming here afterwards, but what about the forgemaster?"

"I'll go, then," said the Cabinet Secretary. "I'm interested in the sort of masterpiece he'll produce. Also, I'm wondering what sort of metal the Sorcerer King gave him."

"He only said it was a rare metal, but you can't get any rarer than adamantite, can you?"

"So it would be more like orichalcum, then?"

The Dwarves were an underground race. Even if their jobs had nothing to do with metallurgy, they would be very interested in a metal they had never seen before.

"If only we could grab him and make him show us. He's been very busy of late, right?"

After receiving the metal from the Sorcerer King, the Forgemaster hurriedly returned to his workshop. Everyone knew the reason for his haste, and so they did not stop him.

"Well, the smithing should be well under way, considering it's him. Making a chain shirt ought to result in a few extra loops, so maybe we could borrow a few of those."

After a chorus of approvals, the Council session dissolved.

After that, their tired bodies craved rest, but the Dwarves were a race which hosted drinking parties even as they spoke of taking a break.

"Wine tastes especially good at the workplace," they said as they downed special, Dwarf-only beverages with high alcohol content. Amidst all this, the Cabinet Secretary suddenly thought of something snuck out of the meeting room that was now a beerhall.

Needless to say, he was going to meet the Forgemaster.

The Forgemaster's workshop was huge, as befitted a man who was responsible for the Dwarven nation's blacksmithing. In all likelihood, it was one of the biggest buildings in Feoh Gēr. It employed many Dwarven artisans and its heat — which could melt adamantite — and the pounding of its hammers on anvils had never stopped before.

However, it was silent today — an occurrence which made the Cabinet Secretary's hairs stand on end.

He was sure that the crucibles were lit.

That was because the temperature went up as he neared them.

In that case, what was the reason for this silence?

The Cabinet Secretary quickened his pace, as though impelled by the unease flowing out of him.

He had come here before, so there was no hesitation as he plunged in towards the crucible where the smiths should have been working.

He saw the blacksmiths, all of whom were familiar faces.

Unable to help himself, he sighed in relief. However, when he noticed the worried looks on the blacksmith's faces and the direction where they were all looking, the unease which seized his heart seemed to come back to life.

"What's wrong?"

As he called out, the eyes of the blacksmiths lit up, as though their savior had arrived.

"He's locked himself in there and refuses to come out."

Apart from its gigantic crucibles, this foundry also contained a workshop for the personal use of the Forgemaster, although it was closer to a miniature foundry in its own right. The Forgemaster was a dedicated worker, and when handling important projects, he would often lock himself inside and not emerge for several days.

That was a fairly common occurrence. The Forgemaster's disciples and the other blacksmiths should not have had that distressed look on their faces.

"...It's not strange, is it?"

"It's true that he locks himself up fairly often… but there's no sound of hammering. And it's been half a day — no, almost an entire day."

"...So maybe he's just drawing up the plans for the design?"

"That's never happened before."

The Cabinet Secretary stroked his beard.

He did not feel this was particularly surprising. However, if the forgemen all felt the same way, then it should probably be an emergency.

“Then why don’t you open the door? Is it locked?”

“No, it’s not locked. However, whenever the Forgemaster retreats to that room, he hates people opening that door.”

“I see. ...So you want me to open it, am I right?”

It would be difficult for the Forgemaster’s disciples. But someone of an equivalent rank might have a better chance of not incurring the Forgemaster’s wrath.

I drew the short straw. Well, it can’t be helped.

“I understand. Then, let me do it. You lot should go first. Just take it as though I insisted on going in myself and you won’t get involved.”

After the smiths thanked him, the Cabinet Secretary stepped up and knocked on the door.

However, there was no response, no matter how many times he knocked.

Fearing the worst, he flung the door open with all his might.

It was the same familiar room. Surprisingly, there was no heat, even though he was only a door removed from the huge crucible. That was due to magical air conditioning. When he shifted his gaze, he saw a crimson flame blazing within the depths of the crucible.

And then, he saw someone facing the fire.

What, he’s there, isn’t he? Just as the Cabinet Secretary was about to sigh in relief, he once again held his breath.

That was because he could sense something strange and inexplicable in the air. Why was the Forgemaster silent? According to the smiths outside, he ought to have reacted immediately to the intrusion.

“Oi.”

Those words were little more than an exhaled breath, but the man should have heard it. Yet there was no response from the Forgemaster.

“Oi!”

The Cabinet was nervous now and he shouted, but as expected, the Forgemaster did not react.

Panting heavily, he advanced to the Forgemaster’s side.

“—Hey!”

“What?”

An answer at last. The Cabinet Secretary almost collapsed on account of the strength fleeing his limbs.

“What? What? Don’t make me—”

The Cabinet Secretary’s words trailed off.

Why had the Forgemaster not turned around to look at him?

Worried for his friend, the Cabinet Minister circled around to look at his face.

He looked different from usual — as though he were a hunted animal. More important than that, he had a ghastly expression on his face, as though he was ready to massacre his own people.

“...What happened?”

The Forgemaster’s face finally moved in response to the words which had slipped out by themselves. No, only his eyeballs moved, turning to look at the Cabinet Secretary’s face.

“What happened? What... happened? Hmph!”

The Forgemaster’s hand moved. He picked up his tongs, plucked out the searing-hot metal ingot from the fires of the crucible, and then chucked it at the Cabinet Master.

“Uwaaaaah!”

The Cabinet Minister scrambled away desperately, and the ingot landed on the ground with a *thud*.

“You bastard! Are you trying to kill me?!”

He could not tolerate this, not even from a friend.

However, the Forgemaster smiled coldly.

“Kill you? Well, you’d think that.”

Then, he reached out and grabbed the ingot. Blacksmiths typically wore heat-resistant gloves, but the shocking thing was that the Forgemaster did not. Neither was he wearing any magic items that bestowed such an effect.

He had grabbed the heated metal ingot with his bare hand.

So reckless and ridiculous was that move that the Secretary imagined he could smell and hear the Forgemaster’s flesh sizzling. The Forgemaster practically spat his words out at the wide-eyed Cabinet Secretary.

“It didn’t heat up!”

“What, what did you say?”

“This damn thing won’t heat up at all!”

Before he knew it, the Cabinet Secretary had caught the ingot tossed his way. For a moment, he imagined that it was emitting a searing heat, but t was not hot at all. In fact, it was surprisingly cold.

“What, what is this?”

That was a pointless question. In all the Cabinet Secretary's knowledge, there was only one thing which corresponded to the description of a metal that did not get hot even when heated. Thus, the question was merely a formality.

Indeed, the Forgemaster's next words confirmed his suspicions.

"It's the ingot that damned undead gave me! I've heated it for an entire day and it won't get hot! I've hammered it and it won't change shape! I can't even leave a mark on it! How the hell am I supposed to make armor with this?!"

"You, you don't think he gave you a metal even he couldn't work with?"

"I'd like to think so too. But look, there's a shortsword made of the same metal! I can mark the ingot with it! The hell does 'most experienced craftsman' mean?! I'm nothing more than an idiot who can only stare dumbly at a hunk of unknown metal!"

The Cabinet Secretary struggled to think of how to comfort the high-strung Forgemaster.

"Then, then what if you asked that undead being how to work it—"

"Those who ask when they don't know are wiser than those who don't ask when they don't know? Something like that, right? That's true. The dwarves of days past do have a point. But — what does my experience count for? Look at these hands."

He forcefully thrust them out. They were a pair of craftsman's hands; thick, heavy and scarred from old burns. Any artisan could take pride in such hands.

"I've touched metal ever since I was a stupid disciple. I've done it longer than anyone else, until now. Because of that, it was only natural to be praised as the most outstanding artisan of my peers. And the reason for that is because I worked harder than anyone else!"

The Forgemaster's face was twisted into knots.

“I’ve given my life to blacksmithing. I don’t think anything is impossible, and I’ve always believed that any metal can be shaped to any desired shape. — What a joke I am! Haha! What was I using to deceive myself? I was nothing more than a tiny frog in a well! And to think I dared call myself a genius. I was such a fool.”

“No, all you need to do now is start learning again, right?”

“That’s right. Yes, you’re right. Though it pains me to hear it…”

The Forgemaster tightly clutched the ingot in his hand.

The fact that the Forgemaster’s face had gone completely blank worried the Cabinet Secretary.

“It’s fine. You’re right. All I need to do is start learning again. Then, what are you doing here?”

“What am I… you… Ah, forget it. That undead king has left this city. We’ll be holding a Council meeting tomorrow, and I came to get you. Also, don’t interfere with the runesmiths.”

“Is that so… I understand. Then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The Cabinet Secretary still felt uneasy, but he could not bring himself to show it.

Fatigue of the body translated to fatigue of the spirit. The Forgemaster would probably recover after a good night’s rest. After forcing himself to accept that explanation, the Cabinet Secretary returned home.

However, the next day, he learned that the Forgemaster had disappeared with the ingot.

Part 2

It was said that there were three trials along the way to the former Royal Capital of the Dwarves.

The first was the Great Rift.

Needless to say, one could not cross it on foot. Of course, one could also look for a way around it, but that increased the chances of encountering monsters. The monsters who lay in wait within such terrain were a fearsome threat to the Dwarves.

It was very difficult to evade an ambush launched by monsters who could sense the footsteps of their targets and attack from underground. One false move might lead to being swallowed and digested. In addition, there were monsters who could launch psychic attacks and deliver lethal blows while the minds of their victims were still confused.

In places like these, humanoids like humans, Dwarves and Elves were little more than prey animals.

While the safest way across would be to take the overland route which cut across the mountain range, that path was still dangerous even for surface-dwellers. One had to worry about being attacked from above by creatures like Perytons, Harpies, Itsumades, Gigant Eagles and other monsters, as well as large flying animals. Since humans had small cones of vision above and below them, a moment's carelessness might lead to missing an ambush from above, which in turn contained the risk of being slain in one blow.

Thus, merely crossing the Great Rift was a trial in itself.

Because of that, the Dwarves had built a city nearby and raised a suspension bridge. Once the bridge had fallen, nobody would be able to cross, and the Great Rift would serve as an impassable barrier to protect the city.

Now that the suspension bridge had been cut by the Quagoa, the Great Rift was an imposing challenge.

However—

It did not bother Ainz and his company at all. After all, the use of the [Fly] spell rendered it a trivial obstacle.

Then, there was the second trial — the land of molten magma.

This sea of scorching heat shone with blinding radiance. It was an extremely dangerous region where inhaling a single lungful of searing air could char one's lungs within the chest.

The reason why lava could flow uncounted kilometers beneath the earth was most likely because this world was a magical one. There were naturally-formed portals which were close to [Gates] in power, and they joined the magma flows of this region to those of a distant region.

Amidst this searing ocean lurked the reason why this place was considered a trial.

That would be the monster who swam lazily through the scorching sea.

It was a gigantic monster over 50 meters long, which resembled a fish. To be precise, it resembled an anglerfish. However, it did not have a lure on its head, but a tentacle which substituted for hands. It could seize a distant foe and deposit it into the monster's oversized jaws.

Its skin was sturdy and tough, and it grew scales like a normal fish, but their toughness far surpassed that of even orichalcum.

Many monsters grew very powerful because they lived a long time. These individuals were famed as superior specimens, and in many cases they would be classified as a different kind of being from their parent race. This monster had completed a specialized form of evolution, and it had become a unique being, found nowhere else in the world.

And so, these were the three rulers of Mt. Rappaslea, as linked by the [Gate]—

The Phoinix Lord, who ruled the sky;

The Ancient Flame Dragon, who ruled the earth;

And the La-Angler Lava Lord, who ruled the underground sea of magma.

If ranked by the adventurers' difficulty estimates, the master of the molten ocean would score around 140. In all likelihood, one would not survive combat with it.

Fortunately, it was poor at engaging terrestrial targets. One would not be attacked if one stayed out of the magma. However, the road to the Dwarven Royal Capital ran along a narrow, unsteady path that was only a little higher than the sea of molten rock below it.

Quite a number of Quagoa had fallen into the magma during their invasion. Unable to withstand the superheated air which blew up from below, their bodies trembled, which sent them plunging into the sea of molten rock.

However—

The crossing posed no problems for travellers prepared with fire immunity and flight magic. They flew through the air, far above the reach of the La-Angler Lava Lord, and neither party realised the presence of each other.

Thus did Ainz and his company cross the sea of magma.

The trials until now had been easily overcome with flight magic, so it was hard to consider them trials. However, the final trial was a challenge in the truest sense of the word, being a long, twisting and branching series of caves.

It certainly qualified for the title of ”labyrinth”.

Still, that alone would be too easy to count as a trial. There were no monsters in this area, so as long as one spent time on making a map, one could eventually overcome it. And if that were all that were to it, then it would only qualify as a trial to those who lacked food and water — or, in other words, those with limited time.

Yes — there was another reason why this place was considered a trial.

This area was filled with vents which spewed plumes of volcanic gases at regular intervals, and there were places where the gases collected. In other words, it was a hellish area of invisible, fatal poison, lashed by fierce winds.

There were several routes which led to the exit, but there was only one which did so and also avoided the gas. Even that route might end up being filled with gas if one did not traverse it quickly enough.

Even the use of the [Fly] spell — which had trumped every challenge thus far — would only allow them to scrape along the ceiling. The sprayed gas would fill even the air up there with poison as well. At most, all the spell would do was allow one to avoid the areas where the gas had settled and collected.

However—

Ainz and the Guardians had adequate countermeasures against gas-vector attacks, so it posed no problems to them. Rather, the only one who might be affected by gaseous attacks was Gondo. The undead had their immunities, and gases which did not inflict acid or fire damage would not harm them at all. Aura had a magic item which surrounded her in a bubble of fresh air, so mere gas counted for nothing against her.

In other words, as long as Gondo was protected by magic, he could walk safely through the billowing vapors of death.

And so, the three trials — terrain hazards which were deemed impassable to those without preparation or prior knowledge — were easily conquered by Ainz and his party.

Ainz's spell — the [Bless of Titania], which told its userthe best way through a dungeon — slowly faded away. That was either a sign that its duration had expired, or that its purpose had ended.

"...Hm. It looks like there's a fresh Quagoa corpse inside that cave. But we haven't caught up with their unit yet. I guess a day makes a huge difference."

"Still, we've closed the gap greatly. We've almost caught up with them now," Aura said after inspecting the footprints on the ground.

“...Really now. Then, let’s discuss what we’ll do afterwards. ...Gondo, we’ll be reaching the Royal Capital soon, right?”

“Yes. I’ve only heard of it in legends, but if those caves were the legendary Maze of Death, then we ought to be there soon.”

A bitter expression came over Gondo’s face.

“Was that really a Maze of Death, though… The legends said that those who didn’t know the way would only find death at the end of their journey…”

Ainz could not answer that question. After all, it had been too simple a challenge. Perhaps it was only a ruse, designed to trick the opposition into thinking they had cleared it before the true trap was sprung. That was not entirely out of the question.

“...When that happens, all we need to do is break through any traps that await. That said, stepping into a preset snare is the height of foolishness. Let’s slow down and advance while staying alert.”

They had been moving at great speeds to catch up with the enemy. However, they had not caught up with them yet, even after coming all the way here. They should rethink their strategy while operating under the assumption that the enemy had already returned to their base.

“Then, we shall consider what we will do after reaching the enemy headquarters.”

After verifying that everyone had nodded, Ainz turned towards Gondo.

“To begin with, Gondo and I will take on the Royal Palace. I will handle the Dragon there.”

Neither the Guardians nor Gondo objected to this.

The highest-ranked Dragons were some of the strongest opponents in YGGDRASIL. It was very dangerous to move separately from the Guardians while they did not know the enemy’s strength. However, Ainz possessed a World-Class Item. It possessed many powers, and one of them was very effective against Dragons. Therefore, even in the worst-case scenario, he ought to be able to escape it.

In contrast, if he brought the Guardians with him and the enemy was more powerful than expected, then he would have to work harder in order to make his escape.

With Gondo around, the worst that could happen was that Ainz would have to abandon him. He could not abandon the lives of his friends' children. Therefore, the best solution was to not have them with him in the first place.

Dragons, huh… I'm looking forward to this.

In YGGDRASIL, Dragons were mighty foes and also a bounty of riches.

They dropped good data crystals, and they had a higher chance of dropping artifacts than normal monsters. One could harvest their skin, meat, blood, fangs, claws, eyeballs, scales and other body parts for various uses.

One could say they were delicious enemies.

Knowing that he would soon encounter his first Dragon in this world filled his heart with a blend of unease, anticipation and desire. Ainz was so delighted that he was barely able to contain himself.

According to the Dwarves, the mighty Frost Dragon which had laid waste to the Western city might be there. If things went poorly, he might face another battle with questionable odds of victory, much like the one with Shalltear.

Could the Dragon have defeated the Death Knights? I can still manage if it was the same entity, but it'll be troublesome if there was another one. Should I remain hidden and bring up everyone except the Hanzos — no, this ought to be the right choice.

"—Ainz-sama?"

"Hm? Ahh, Shalltear. Forgive me, I was lost in thought. Then, I shall give you two your orders as well. Aura and Shalltear, you are to face the Quagoa and have them submit to my rule. If they dare to refuse, then show them the power of Nazarick!"

The two Guardians replied with forceful affirmatives.

Ainz's gaze shifted to Gondo. He did not look like he had anything to say. That attitude seemed to imply that he would go along with any decision Ainz made.

While Ainz had agreed to clear out the Quagoa, Ainz did not intend to completely exterminate them. He simply felt that the genocide of a race which did not exist in YGGDRASIL was a bit of a waste. Indeed, killing them all might eliminate this race from the world. No, even if that were not the case, they might end up being beneficial to Nazarick in the future.

Of course, they might also be harmful to Nazarick. However, extirpating them before verifying that was something of a waste.

Extermination is easy, but revival is difficult. Thus, there's only one path I can take. And besides—

"If they are fools who will not swear their loyalty to me, then reduce their numbers to around 10'000 or so. Try and keep the strong ones alive. However, after considering future issues, do not select them purely based on strength. You must make sure an equal number of them are female. In addition, you must not let any of them escape, do you understand? Especially the one that is the equivalent to their king."

"But… Ainz-sama…"

Ainz urged Aura — who looked depressed — to continue speaking.

"We don't know exactly how large the Dwarven capital is, but it seems like quite a large area. It'll be difficult for just the two of us to ensure that none of the Quagoa escape from such a broad space. What should we do?".

"Hm. A reasonable question. Because of that — Aura, it's time for you to shine. Use the World-Class item I gave you earlier."

"Is, is that really alright?"

"Umu. This is when it should be put to use."

"I, I understand!"

Tension was written all over their faces.

"While that there are no use limits on that World-Class item, if the enemy fulfils certain conditions and escapes, ownership of the Item will automatically shift to them. That is the worst-case scenario and must be avoided at all costs."

Ainz recalled the incident where Ainz Ooal Gown had seized possession of it.

How many mails had the enemy sent, begging them to "give it back"?

Ainz snorted.

"If you didn't want to lose it, shouldn't have used it," was the matter-of-fact reply. Nothing was more stupid than a guild which could not accept such a rational conclusion. If they did not want it to be taken, they should have stashed it in their treasury and never taken it out. Therefore, Ainz kept harping on it, even though he felt that there would be no problems with its use.

"Also, you must be cautious of foes you cannot suck into it, because such enemies possess World-Class Items as well."

"That means you won't be able to enter either, right, Ainz-sama?"

"Not when it opens up. However, there are ways to go in if you choose to do so. You need to pay attention to the time lag when that happens… Alright, let's go, then."

Led by Aura, the group set forth.

Perhaps they were near the former Dwarven Royal Capital, but even the naturally-formed caverns were easy to traverse. All the stalactites and stalagmites had been cut down, probably for convenience of passage. They walked on for a time, surrounded by the labor of the Dwarves.

Aura — who walked at their head — suddenly stopped. Then she cupped her hand to a long ear, listening intently.

Ainz and the others kept quiet, waiting for Aura to give the word.

“Ainz-sama, I can hear many living beings ahead, numbering in the hundreds. I can’t gauge the exact distance, but I think we’ll make contact with them within minutes.”

“Hoh… have we caught up to them?”

“No, they don’t sound like they’re moving. It feels like they’re waiting…”

“I see. Did they sense our pursuit? Are they ambush troops?”

If that were the case, they had probably used some sort of divination magic to spy on Ainz and the others.

Ainz smiled thinly.

Until now, he had not let the enemy observe their power. Because of that, they wanted to throw their unit against Ainz and observe their abilities.

From the enemy’s resolve and actions, he could sense their anxiety and willingness to sacrifice lives to learn about them. It made Ainz feel that he had won his battle of wits against his opponent.

“Ainz-sama, shall we capture them?”

“Hm, come to think of it, we haven’t shown too much of our abilities to the enemy yet. Therefore, let’s gather some information before we roll over their headquarters in one fell swoop.”

“Understood!”

In addition, even if they did learn about them, they could not devise a counter-strategy that easily.

There were two main types of characters in YGGDRASIL.

There were those who specialized in a certain field, and those whose abilities were evenly distributed.

In the former case, even if one learned about an enemy, they would have a hard time dealing with them if the information did not pertain to their specialty. In the latter case, they might be able to deal with them, but given the even spread of their foe's abilities, said countermeasures against them would not be foolproof.

Of course, there might be people like Ainz who knew many spells and who possessed many items left behind by their comrades, and were thus able to adapt to many circumstances, or someone like Touch Me with very high overall stats, but those were the exception to the rule. Therefore, there was only one thing they had to worry about.

...The number of powerful entities. The fact that I don't know that figure scares me a little. Given that I can't fully verify that particular point, I should probably keep the idea of retreat in mind — hm. Well, in any case, we can't proceed without punching them to see what the enemy has up their sleeve. —Ohh, the spirit of Yamaiko-san is possessing me...

"Shalltear. You are not to go berserk this time, alright?"

"Of course!"

Shalltear readied her Spuit Lance.

"Very good. Normally, we should avoid revealing the fact that we possess divine-class items to the enemy. However, they won't be able to see through it without very good detection skills. Alright, go."

"Understood!"

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In Feoh Berkanan — the stately, magnificent former Royal Capital of the Dwarves, built during the flower of their civilization — the largest building besides the Royal Palace was the Merchant's Guild, because it contained many rooms used during meetings and temporary vaults used to briefly store resources.

This building was used by many Dwarves, and it was larger than any other structure in the city. However, it was not the residence of the Lord of the Quagoa Clans, Pe Riyuro.

By the time Yozu returned, Riyuro was seated — almost sinking — into a large and soft cushion. His attitude was one which carried on as normal, without entertaining the possibility of anger or anxiety, even after hearing about Yozu's failure.

Yozu bowed, and described what had happened.

While the important details had already been sent via messenger, he was here to explain the details. In particular, he needed to thoroughly elaborate on the Dwarven Kingdom's trump card, the black suits of armor which he had seen with his own two eyes.

Riyuro listened in silence, and then he slowly moved his hand, reaching into a cage beside him. He withdrew a squeaking lizard; a fat, round and juicy lizard, a snack fit for a king.

Riyuro extended the hand holding the lizard toward Yozu.

"—Want a bite?"

"No, no thank you."

"Really now," Riyuro muttered. Then he crushed the lizard's head with his jaws, and Yozu smelled the faint scent of blood and innards.

All 20 centimeters of the lizard disappeared into Riyuro's mouth within three bites.

Riyuro wiped his bloodstained hands and mouth clean with a nearby towel.

“—And so you retreated. What of your pursuers?”

“We’re unsure of that. However—”

Since the suspension bridge had fallen, he did not think the enemy would continue their pursuit. And frankly speaking, they had the Dwarves by the throat. All the Dwarves could do was reinforce their defenses, find and seal off the flanking route, and then perhaps they might mount a counterattack on this place.

The reason why they had only committed those two suits of black armor was either because they were foolish enough to split their forces or because that was the sum of their military power.

That was Yozu’s opinion, which he shared with Riyuro.

“It wouldn’t be strange if there were one or two more of them.”

Riyuro seemed to have sensed Yozu’s unconscious display of surprise. He poked repeatedly at the lizards in the cage while lazily explaining his meaning.

The Dwarves were confident in their fortress’ defense. If it was brought down, they would feel that the chances of their city being conquered were very high. Therefore, it was not wrong to assume that the black suits of armor they had sent out were a significant portion of their total number.

However, since they did not know how exactly the fortress had been conquered, committing all their forces to the frontlines was a dangerous gamble. If there were multiple avenues of infiltration, then they might be lost.

While it was not a situation where they could dole their fighting strength out bit by bit, they did not have the information to commit their entire force to a counterattack either.

Therefore, even if there were more, there would only be one, maybe two more. This was what he had come up with.

Yozu felt that it was exactly as the Lord had said, and he was filled with awe at the wisdom of his Lord.

"Then, who do you think can defeat those Golems?"

"I am certain that you could defeat it, my Lord!"

Riyuro was the mightiest being among the eight clans of the Quagoa. Indeed, his fighting ability was exemplary.

He might well be able to fight the entire Quagoa race by himself and emerge victorious. There had never been anyone as powerful as him in the history of the Quagoa.

Yozu recalled the sight of Riyuro battling a monster in the past. He was absolutely confident that Riyuro's might was superior to that of the Golems.

"Dispense with the pleasantries. Do you truly think so?"

"Yes! I do think so!"

Riyuro chuckled bitterly, but Yozu's reply was earnest. He had no answer besides that.

"...Which Clan were you born in?"

A surprising question. After Yozu stated his birth clan, Riyuro fell into thought once more.

"I see… In that case, you must really think I can win, then?"

"What, what does that mean?"

"I simply suspected that you might consider this a chance to eliminate me. It is true that I am stronger than anyone else in the entire species. Because of that, you might seek to have me battle the Golems after underestimating their strength. Then, the Golems would kill me. Well, if you did that, then nobody would be able to defeat the Golems… but they would be damaged during their battle with me, and then you might be able to crush them with numbers."

Although the Lord to which he had pledged his loyalty cast his suspicions upon him, Yozu's heart was filled with nothing but respect.

If he were in Riyuro's place, he might not have thought so deeply into the issue.

Yozu firmly believed that Riyuro was the true Lord of the Quagoa, and his loyalty deepened ever further.

Riyuro did not quite understand the man before him, and asked Yozu a question.

"...Why did you not immediately answer that you had no such intentions?"

"Yes! My, my deepest apologies! I was merely entranced your deep insights, my Lord! As you have said, I harbored no such intentions!"

Riyuro laughed loudly.

"What an interesting fellow you are! ...The men I granted you were lost for nothing, so there must be a punishment for that. But I will not inflict wounds upon you, which might affect your future development. In truth, you learned about the Golems and returned here after realizing that it was important information. In addition, your anticipation of enemy pursuit and the allocation of part of your troops to the defense of the city shows your keenness of thought."

"Thank you very much!"

Yozu bowed deeply.

"Now, I have a question for an excellent leader like you. How shall we gather more information about those Golems?"

"By attacking the shorties' nation."

"That is one way to go about it. If you do so, we might be able to learn if there are truly Golems in reserve."

"Yes! If there aren't any more, then we must conquer the city as soon as possible no matter the losses we suffer."

"Umu", Riyuro nodded.

If it was a matter of lives, then much time would be needed to bear and raise them. However, Golems only needed to be built. Time was not on their side, but on the enemy's.

"What other methods are there?"

"Forgive me, but I cannot think of any at the moment."

Riyuro thrust his hand into the lizard-filled cage and withdrew another lizard.

"...Would you like one?"

Do I look that hungry?

It was true that he had fled back here with all his strength, and he had not even eaten or rested properly so far. However, he was not thirsty or hungry enough to beg from the king's table.

"No, thank you."

"Really now," Riyuro replied. Then, he chewed off the lizard's head like he had the previous one. After devouring it like before, Yozu asked Riyuro a question.

"Then, my Lord. Have you thought of any other methods?"

"Ah, yes. We can ask that fellow. His wisdom is far beyond mine… Although, the troubling thing is that the payment he demands will be equally high."

"By payment you mean… could it be!"

Yozu immediately guessed it from those words.

"Correct. We must give the Dragons—"

Just as Riyuro was about to speak, there was a disturbance from outside, and then the doors swung open with a great crash.

“Clan Lord!”

It was one of the guards.

“Looks urgent, what happened?”

“Yes! There seems to be someone headed toward this city!”

“Where are they coming from?”

According to the guard, they had come from the flank where Yozu had positioned his troops. In other words, they had come from the Dwarven nation.

“So they’ve sent out pursuit troops… I underestimated the stunties.”

With that, Riyuro rose to his feet.

Yozu’s eyes seemed to ask him where he was going. Riyuro sensed this, and replied:

“It seems we’ve been saved a lot of decision-making. I will go meet the Dragons now.”

“Are you going to ask about the Golems?”

“No. I’m going to convince them to deal with the approaching stunties. Since they’re stunties, they’ll have their Golems in tow. Then, we should have them fight the Dragons and weaken both sides. ...Hmph. Might as well let them earn their keep.”

The Clan Lord was deeply furious about how the Dragons had taken the best spot in the city — the Royal Palace — for their own. This was something which only his most trusted confidants knew, in addition to how the Clan Lord had cleverly hidden those feelings and bowed to the Dragons.

There was an overwhelming difference between the power of Dragons and the Quagoa.

Therefore, they had to feign an air of servitude until they could pare down the Dragons' strength. However, there were very few beings who could fight on even terms with the Dragons in the mountain range. With one notable exception aside, those would probably be the Frost Giants.

And now the chance had come, Riyuro said.

"Yozu, it's not too likely, but just in case, begin moving toward the ruins district. I don't want you to get involved in the battles of Dragons."

One district of the Dwarven Royal Capital had been completely destroyed before the Quagoa had taken it over. The Quagoa had not rebuilt this area, in order to use it as a staging ground to gather a vast army. It would seem that it would finally be put to use.

"Understood."

"Then… can you help me prepare some offerings for the meeting with the Dragons? They like jewels, so prepare some of them. I trust you also know that they're very greedy and won't agree to the initial payment right away. They'll surely raise their price. With that in mind, prepare some lower-valued items as well."

After nodding to Riyuro to show he understood, Yozu immediately began the preparations.

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The mightiest species in this world were the Dragons. There were races which could adapt to the harsh lands where humanity could not reach. The Azellisia Mountain Range was no exception, and the Dragons ruled the roost here.

These Dragons were known as Frost Dragons.

Usually, Dragons had slender bodies. Those did not resemble the crawling forms of lizards so much as they did those of cats. Among them, Frost Dragons were even slimmer, like snakes.

Their scales were bluish-white, but as they grew older, they turned the white of snowfall. Having adapted to their environment, they possessed cold immunity, but in contrast, they were vulnerable to fire.

In addition, there was the trump card of the Draconic races. They possessed the fearsome power of freezing Dragon's breath.

The Lord of these Frost Dragons, Olasird'arc=Haylilyal, coiled around his throne, looking down on the Quagoa who craved an audience with him.

"So, you have come. What is the matter?"

"Yes, I am deeply honored to be granted an audience with the mighty White Dragon Lord, Olasird'arc=Haylilyal—"

"—Dispense with the formalities. Get to the point."

That said, Olasird'arc's eyes narrowed slightly.

Being a Dragon Lord had a special significance among Dragons. It was a title only given to those who had reached the highest age category (Ancient) among the Dragons, or powerful Dragons who possessed special powers, or those Dragons who could use exotic magic. These outstanding Dragons were awarded the title of Lord.

Being addressed by such a glorious title was quite pleasing.

"Yes! Firstly, I wish to thank you for granting an audience."

The Quagoa waiting behind the Quagoa Lord produced a beat-up old sack.

They opened it, and as expected, the glitter of gold spilled forth.

It was not enough to satisfy him, but that amount should have been all the Quagoa could manage, so he had to bear with it.

“Alright then, what do you want.”

“Yes! In truth, there are some uninvited guests with designs upon our homes, so I was wondering if we could call upon your matchless might, White Dragon Lord-sama.”

“Hm…”

To Olasird’arc, Quagoa were an inferior species. They were beings who should revere the mighty Dragons, and they were comparable to his possessions. It was somewhat aggravating to allow them to be killed at will. However, it was equally infuriating for him to have to take action on the behalf of such inferior lifeforms.

Olasird’arc’s gaze fell upon his glittering throne — a small mountain of gold and precious stones.

One habit which united all Dragons was the love of precious metals, jewels, magic items and related wealth. Olasird’arc was no exception in this regard.

However, while he might be able to dig tunnels and excavate precious metals or raw gemstones, he could not process them. In addition, the mighty should not be doing such things. That was what slaves were for.

Thus, it did not matter if he roused himself to labor on the behalf of his slaves. His heart surged with such generous feelings.

“And who are these people?”

“We are not sure. We have not grasped their true identity yet. However, they should be Dwarves.”

“Dwarves. ...Umu.”

Olasird’arc glanced at the great door behind him.

Behind that door was the Dwarven City’s former treasury.

No matter how many times Olasird’arc had attacked it, it had not opened or been destroyed. The protective magic worked on it by the Dwarven runesmiths had defended their treasures from all the attacks he had brought to bear on it.

His obsession with the contents of the vault had long faded, and that door was little more than a scratching post for his claws. However, when he heard about the Dwarves, the smoldering embers in his heart ignited once more.

If these Dwarves could make it here, perhaps they might have a way to open this vault.

Is it time to abandon the Quagoa? The Dwarves are more useful, in various ways.

As Olasird’arc contemplated these matters, he glared coldly at the Quagoa beneath him, and the Quagoa Lord’s pleas finally came to an end.

“I am sure that you will be able to defeat the Dwarves or whatnot with contemptuous ease, White Dragon Lord-sama. Please, lend your strength to us! Needless to say, when they are defeated we will offer up double the sum from just now, no more than that!”

His greed tickled by that last line, Olasird’arc’s face twitched.

“...I see. I shall consider it.”

“Please wait! White Dragon Lord-sama, the enemy is close! And the Dwarves seek to retake this city!”

Olasird’arc turned his keen gaze upon the Quagoa.

“What do you mean by that? Are you implying that these measly Dwarves can evict me from my nest?”

“I did not say that! But, there’s no telling what the Dwarves intend to do! For all we know, they might have a way to destroy this city!”

“Do you not think they would have done so already if that was the case?”

“It is very likely they intend to destroy the city from the inside!”

“Hm,” Olasird’arc thought. It seemed a little far-fetched, but it could not be entirely ruled out.

This place was absolutely necessary for the creation of a Draconic Empire.

After claiming the Dwarves’ Royal Palace, he had ordered his wives to lay their eggs here, and then raise his children as they grew.

In the past, they had randomly found a place to lay eggs and left them there, or kicked them out of the nest a year or two after they were born. That would not strengthen the Draconic race.

I must increase the number of my offspring, and then subjugate the Frost Giants. Then, I can completely dominate this mountain range, Olasird’arc had thought.

The Frost Giants and the Frost Dragons were the apex predators of this mountain range. Therefore, they had struggled for a long time to determine who was the top dog.

The Frost Giants were immune to cold, which meant that the Frost Dragons’ trump card of icy Dragon breath could not harm them. The power of the massive weapons which the Frost Giants wielded could not be overlooked, even by Dragons. If they came in numbers, the Dragons might well be defeated. Indeed, there were Frost Dragons who had lost to Frost Giants, and who were used as hounds by them.

Naturally, the Frost Dragons knew that too. If Olasird’arc were one of them, he would not miss the chance to destroy a powerful foe before their numbers could increase. If he had to abandon this territory, then the Frost Giant tribes would surely unite to attack them before he could seize a new seat of power.

Olasird’arc regarded his concubines, sprawled lazily around the room.

They were three female Dragons.

There was the youngest of them, with a single alabaster horn, Mianatalon=Fuviness.

The one who had fought with Olasird'arc for territory many times, Munuinia=Ilyslym.

And then there was the only Dragon in residence here who could use divine magic (albeit only of the 1st tier), Kilystran=Denshushua.

“What do you think?

“...Why not help them? After all, the miserable little Dwarves are hardly fearsome foes.”

“I agree too. Frankly speaking, I don't care what they say. But if the Dwarves attack, knowing that we're here, that would be equivalent to looking down on us. We ought to carve fear into the hearts of those cocky little creatures.”

He turned his gaze from Muninia — who was scratching at the floor with a sharp claw — and towards Kilystran.

“And what say you?”

After addressing Kilystran, she tilted her head.

“I oppose and approve of it. I oppose it because we cannot be sure that these attackers really are Dwarves. In addition, if they're attacking while aware of our presence, they must have surely taken our power into consideration. However, while the very idea of destroying the city is absurd, a mechanism capable of doing so is not out of the reach of Dwarven technology. It would be foolish not to respond to that.”

Olasird'arc smiled bitterly. She had such a twisted personality. That was why he liked her.

“So, the ayes have it. —Well then. I shall accept your request, inferior Quagoa.”

“Yes! You have our deepest thanks!”

As Olasird'arc glared coldly at the Quagoa kowtowing before him, he made a pronouncement.

"However, you must offer ten times the previous amount of tribute."

"Ten! Ten times?!"

Olasird'arc snorted at the Quagoa Lord, who had raised his head.

"You do not even know who is attacking. That much should be expected. ...Then, what will you do? If you cannot produce the requisite amount, then you can deal with it yourselves."

"Please, please wait! We will offer the tribute! Please let us offer the tribute!"

Suddenly, Olasird'arc thought of something.

Could the Quagoa actually pay that much gold? Or was it because the Dwarves were unimaginably powerful foes, which was why they were trying their best to get him to commit no matter how much they had to pay?

Well, it doesn't matter. If they can't pay, then just as Munuinia said, I will carve an indelible terror into the hearts of those weaklings (Quagoa).

"Then, begone."

"Yes! But… when can we expect your arrival?"

"Soon. Until then, wait."

"Yes!"

As Olasird'arc watched the Quagoa leave, Mianatalon asked: "Will you be going in person?"

"As if. Of course not."

Olasird'arc was the most powerful Dragon here. That being the case, it would be foolish for him to actually fight on the behalf of his slaves even if he was paid. Therefore—

“Who should I send over... Whose child would be best?”

They were all his children. Every Dragon here with the exception of his concubines was bound to Olasird’arc by blood.

“In that case, send my child.”

“Yours? Who?”

Kilystran had birthed four children for Olasird’arc, and each of them was a Dragon of over a century of age. They were far more powerful than the Quagoa.

“The eldest, of course.”

“Hejinmal, then?”

Olasird’arc frowned.

“That boy might look like that, but he has a good head on his shoulders and he will see the opposition for what they really are. If they turn out to be Dwarves, don’t you think he’ll bring about a most agreeable negotiation? You must be starting to tire of Quagoa slaves, no?”

“Can he do all that? Can the other children not do it?”

Olasird’arc agreed with what Munuinia said.

“Better than Toranjelit, at least.”

“...Kilystran. The most important thing for Dragons is the power of their bodies. One cannot defeat power and speed with one’s head. Olasird’arc beat me because his body was stronger than mine. Remember that. Toranjelit’s superior body is far better than that of Hejinmal’s!”

Toranjelit was one of Olasird’arc’s children by Munuinia. In terms of raw strength, he was the best among his offspring.

"But things will turn out poorly if you don't think. If you send out your child — who might kill the Quagoa for no reason — who knows what they'll end up doing?"

"That's enough."

Olasird'arc halted Munuinia, who was about to say something, and then looked at Mianatalon's face. She seemed to find all this squabbling terribly boring.

"Let's go with Kilystran's idea and call Hejinmal over."

"It's no use. He won't come."

Olasird'arc sensed his plan falling apart right from the start.

Munuinia chuckled, a thin, unhappy sound. It would be troublesome if they argued again, and Olasird'arc raised his voice.

"Just break down the door or whatnot and drag him out."

"Ara, I didn't destroy your fortress because you asked me not to. Does that mean you're giving me permission? Although, it may not just be the door that gets destroyed."

Indeed, he remembered saying those words. While Dragons were skilful, they could not rebuild a door once destroyed, and they did not know magic which could do that. Therefore, if they destroyed something, they would leave it where it was.

As the White Dragon Lord, it would be a shame to live in a castle filled with holes. Therefore he had demanded his concubines and his offspring adhere to that rule.

Although his concubines would probably go if he ordered—

"It can't be helped. I'll go, then."

"Please."

Olasird'arc looked at Kilystran with an indescribable expression on his face.

The fact that he had to go in person despite being a Lord did not sit well with him. In response to that, should he allow a few Quagoa to live here and let them work for him?

However, Olasird'arc abandoned the many possibilities which appeared in his mind.

He could not bear the thought of having inferior lifeforms like the Quagoa running around his fortress. Someday, when he defeated the Giants, he would have them work for him as slaves.

Until then, he would have to bear with it.

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When one considered the height of the Dwarves, their Royal Palace was of a staggering size. It was because it was so large that the Dragons could live here, and it was a long distance from one end to the other.

Olasird'arc climbed and climbed, until he reached the door on the highest level.

Then, he shouted:

"It's me, open up."

He waited for a while, but there was no movement from the other side of the door.

It was impossible that he was not in. The son who lived in this room was a hikkikomori. He had not recalled him ever leaving his room. Even his meals were sent to him by his siblings.

It was deeply aggravating that he would dare pretend he was not in, in front of his own father, a Dragon Lord.

“I’ll say it again. It’s me. Open up.”

Dragons had very keen senses. The way he was shouting, anyone inside should have heard it, and they would have woken up even if they were sleeping.

However — the door did not open.

The anger which blazed up turned into motion.

He lashed out at the door with his tail.

Struck by a tail that was the size of a log and sheathed with scales that were harder than steel, the door creaked as it twisted. The Dwarves who had built this door had probably not expected it to take a Dragon’s tail slap.

There were signs of movement inside, but this was not enough to quell Olasird’arc’s anger.

He slammed the door again, breaking it half down. Shattered and scattered stones flew inside like buckshot.

A distasteful “Hieeeeee” came from within.

“Get out of there, right now!”

In response to the angry shout, a Dragon sprang up.

Frost Dragons had slender bodies, but not this one. Simply put, it looked obese.

It had a pair of tiny glasses on its nose, and it regarded Olasird’arc from head to toe with a nervous look in its eyes.

This was his son, but this shameful display made Olasird’arc sigh.

Well, given that he was standing in front of a ruler like himself, cringing and twitching like this was unavoidable. Still, he had hoped to see some strength in his own son’s eyes.

And then there was that disgusting fat body of his. He was more like a swine than a Dragon.

In truth, having to send a child like this out to fight on his behalf might dmage his reputation.

As Olasird'arc contemplated this, his son — who seemed afraid of the way his father was staring right at him — ventured a question.

“F-father, what, what do you wish of me?”

That said, he might not be much of a Dragon, but he was still a Dragon. Dragons grew more powerful with age. With that in mind, perhaps even that flabby frame of his could still be of use.

“I have a job for you, Hejinmal.”

“A, a job?”

“Ahh. The Quagoa seem to have been invaded by the Dwarves or something. Repel them.”

“Hieee.”

“Hieee?”

“N-nothing. It's nothing, Father. J-just, I, I'm, er, how shall I put this, I'm er, not very confident in my strength…”

“Then what are you confident in? Do you feel you can defeat the enemy with magic?”

Dragons slowly gained the ability to use arcane magic during their maturation, but those were little more than innate abilities. They could not be compared to magic casters at all. However, there were some Dragons who had learned to use actual magic.

For example, there was one of Olasird'arc's own concubines, Kilystran=Denshushua. There was also one of the Republic's Councillors, the "Blue Sky Dragon Lord" Suveria=Myronsilk, who had the powers of a druid and could use divine magic. It was also said that in the far east, there were Dragons who had attained the Paladin class and who could use magic from other systems.

"...Well, that's one thing. I had to learn by myself because I had no mentor to teach me…"

"Then what the hell have you been doing in there all this while?"

There was a forceful gleam in Hejinmal's eyes.

"Learning. I've been gathering knowledge."

"...What? Knowledge? Weren't you learning how to use arcane magic?"

"No, it's not like that, Father. The knowledge I sought was not to use magic, but to further my studies, learn how this city was built, what sort of races live in this world and so on. I was learning about that sort of thing."

"...I don't understand at all. Does learning these things make you strong? None of that matters if you don't become powerful."

There was nothing more important in this world than becoming stronger. Since this was a world where only the strong survived, one needed to grow stronger to live. In contrast, one could say that not wanting to become strong was essentially rejecting life.

Just then, he spotted it. Hejinmal had tried to cover it up, but he saw that his son had done something, like a wordless gesture.

"What is it? Spit it out."

His son remained silent. That disgraceful attitude of his made Olasird'arc flare up again.

Just as he was about to begin bellowing at him, he thought of why he had come here.

While he did not care what happened to the Quagoa, debts had to be paid.

“It doesn’t matter if you lock yourself up in your room until you lose your agility, but there’s no point losing yourself in books. If you want to acquire knowledge, leave this place and travel the world.”

Olasird’arc had already begun losing interest in Hejinmal. He had abandoned his body in exchanged for something utterly useless. There was nothing else he could say about this, and he had lost any semblance of concern for his own son.

“I, I was preparing for that. If I don’t know what sort of people there are in the world, I might die before I manage to see it.”

“Then why don’t you die? — You’re being too foolish. Why not seek strength from the beginning? Once you’re strong, you’ll be feared even when you leave this place, no? Like me.”

“But, Father. Knowing what sort of powerful beings there are in the world is very important too. It’s the same with you, isn’t it, Father? Aren’t the Frost Giants strong? If you went against them without knowing anything—”

“—I’m not afraid of those Frost Giants.”

“F-forgive me, Father.”

As he glared at Hejinmal, who had his head plastered to the ground, Olasird’arc rounded his shoulders powerlessly.

“That’s enough. I command you to complete your task. Then, I will kick you out after a month. You can live as you please from then on.”

Part 3

“Haa~”

Hejinmal was currently in a tunnel which led to the Royal Capital. He sighed, the way his father had.

“I’m not good at fighting…”

“Not being good” did not cover the whole of it. In all honesty, he was so weak that if he went up against his younger brothers, he might end up losing to them. Thus, he was uneasy, which resulted in him muttering to himself.

“The enemy… hopefully they’ll be scared of the way I look and run away.”

Hejinmal inhaled forcefully, sucking up his protruding gut. Then he splayed his claws and opened his maw. That way, he would look more like a proper Dragon.

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

Hejinmal gingerly removed the glasses on his nose. They were not a magic item, but if they broke, there would be no replacements for them. Thus, he had to treat them with care.

“Haaa… Dragonscale makes for strong armor… but all I can do is pray the Dwarves aren’t savages…”

But what if they were?

No, that was almost certain to be the case. That was because Dwarven libraries were the source of much information about Draconic materials.

Hejinmal forced himself to stop trembling.

He knew all the Quagoa in the Royal Capital were watching him. If possible, he would have preferred to fight in a deeper tunnel, where he would not have an audience. However, if that was the case, the Quagoa would not be able to see him do battle, so his father had forbidden it.

Father had told him to investigate the enemy to the best of his ability, and take them as servants if possible. But this was not a sign of friendship. Instead, it was an order to display his strength and dominate the weak as one of the strong.

Therefore, defeat equalled death. He would die if he was defeated in battle. Even if he survived a defeat, the Quagoa would lose their respect for Father. That would displease him, and then Hejinmal would be killed by his father anyway.

Then, how about fleeing right away? After all, he would be exiled in a month, no matter what he did.

It was a good idea, but he needed a month to prepare for it.

Hejinmal expelled his breath.

The supercooled suspire froze an entire wall into an expanse of solid white.

"Good! My breath is normal, and its power is consistent with my age."

This was one of a Dragon's trump cards — Dragon breath. Frost Dragons possessed freezing breath, and its power grew with age. Hejinmal's breath was quite well developed, and it was more reliable than his own physical strength.

"...Still."

Dragon breath was a frightening thing. Anyone who knew even a little about Dragons was aware of that. After all, this was a fundamental ability of all Dragons.

In fact, the Dwarven libraries had said just that. There was no way the Dwarves coming this way would not be prepared for it.

Hejinmal sank further into despair.

Although Father had already said so, if he could really use magic or whatnot, things would surely be different—

“I’m just a sacrificial pawn.”

His brothers faithfully obeyed his father in a very Draconic way. The fact that he had not given this task to them but to Hejinmal was a sign that he did not care if the hikkikomori of his family died off.

He did not resent his fate.

If he had not encountered books, if he had not known the satisfaction of seeking knowledge, he would not be what he was today. There was no point regretting that now.

Suddenly, Hejinmal’s nose twitched.

He turned his ear to listen, and picked up multiple footsteps approaching from within the tunnel.

Those were not the sounds of Quagoa feet, because they were clearly wearing shoes.

Are those Dwarves?! There’s only a few of them, which means… They’re very confident of victory with just those numbers? Or are they an advanced scouting party? So if I defeat them the job’s done and there’ll be no problem if I go back?

Strictly speaking, he would have fulfilled his orders even if he only defeated that scouting party. The question now was whether an excuse like that would be accepted.

Illuminated by glowing stones, four silhouettes — though he could not be sure as they were still far away — emerged from the cavern.

Are the smaller three Dwarves? Then what’s that larger one? Even the Dwarven subraces shouldn’t be that big. Then, did the Dwarves beg that bigger shape for help, much like the Quagoa did with Father?

Whether or not the Dwarves had requested its help, he had to be wary of the bigger shape.

Still, while it was a large silhouette, it was still much smaller than a Dragon.

Should I strike first with my breath? Hejinmal immediately discarded that notion.

No. I should ask them what they want and try to complete this task through negotiation.

Regular Dragons would immediately launch into a fight. However, Hejinmal had no confidence in himself and did not want this encounter to end in tragedy. Therefore, he sought a way to safely resolve the situation.

Finally, his keen Draconic vision ─ although Hejinmal's was somewhat subpar for his kind ─ finally verified that the one walking at the head of the group was not a Dwarf.

Haven't I read about them in a book before? Isn't that one of the Dark Elves, who live in the depths of the forests?

It was impossible for one to be here.

However, that one's far too short, compared to the Dark Elves in the books. Could it be a child between a Dark Elf and a Dwarf? Or is it just a Dark Elf child?

As Hejinmal pondered these things and many others, he shifted his gaze to the huge shadow behind the Dark Elf, and then his eyes went wide.

Haaah?! Isn't that an Elder Lich?! What is it doing here? This is bad. They're immune to freezing breath, and they can cast [Fireballs].

Fire was the weakness of Frost Dragons. In other words, his most powerful attack was useless against this Elder Lich, and his opponent could grievously wound him.

And… What's that? It looks like a really expensive robe...

Dragons had a keen nose for treasure. They could roughly sniff out the value of any item, no matter how valuable. Right now, his nose was telling him that the Elder Lich before him was wearing an unimaginably expensive set of spellcaster's robes.

...No, at a closer look, it's the same way with the clothes of the Dark Elf walking ahead of them. I've never seen something as valuable as that before...

Hejinmal was a hikkikomori, so the only thing he could value was the Dwarven libraries. Thus, his nose for valuable treasure might have lost its keenness. It might have been a natural ability, but it would still atrophy if it was not used. However, he did not think that was the case.

And then, the shadow after that looks female… Isn't that a Dwarf as well? It's not a Dark Elf, and neither is it an Elder Lich. Then… an Elf? Or a human? I don't get it. Still, she looks like she's wearing very expensive clothing too. ...Hm, is my nose not sensitive any more? But if that's not the case...

Finally, he saw the Dwarf at the rear of the group, and Hejinmal was relieved.

Just a regular Dwarf, and he's not wearing anything valuable.

Then, Hejinmal shook his head.

That's being too naive, right? The three people in front of him are anything but normal. Maybe this Dwarf is something special too. Carelessness is dangerous.

After that, the Dark Elf pointed towards him, as though to tell everyone that he was there.

Although he thought he might be suddenly attacked一by a [Fireball], in particular一the opposition merely paused to confer, and soon they were headed towards Hejinmal again.

...Should I prepare myself for the worst?

If they had attacked immediately, he would have gone on his guard. But that was not the case. What should he do now?

Nggg — my stomach aches. I hope that's just a kind-hearted undead being who's come to negotiate!

He could be killed. To Hejinmal — who had lived in safety all his life — the time until the group stopped was interminable torment.

The group finally reached Hejinmal's vicinity.

Hejinmal took a deep breath, and then — careful not to seem too imposing — he spoke.

They were a group who had approached Hejinmal, a Dragon, without any hesitation. Therefore, Hejinmal sensed that trying to appear threatening would be very dangerous.

"The area from this place on belongs to the Quagoa and we Dragons. Why — ahem — may I ask you fine folks your reasons for coming here?"

The Dark Elf standing at the head of the group changed places with the Elder Lich. In that moment, he realised who was the leader of the group.

"Hm? We're about to launch an attack and there's only one Dragon here? The Dragons I know of grow stronger with age — in other words, their bodies get larger and more powerful. Given your size, you don't seem particularly strong… What's the meaning of this?"

What did he mean by "what's the meaning of this"? Hejinmal had no idea. However, it would seem this Elder Lich was not at all wary of a Dragon like himself.

Ah, this… this is really bad. It's so bad I can't even describe it.

"In any case, I doubt they'd send just one Dragon to collect information on us… Is this a strategy on the enemy's part, or am I being paranoid? Given the information we got from the Quagoa we captured, probably the latter."

He had no idea what the Elder Lich was talking about from the beginning. It did not look like the Elder Lich wanted to enlighten Hejinmal either. In other words, he was probably talking to himself, but why did he feel so afraid, then?

“...Thinking too much about this is annoying. Let’s see what kind of Dragon you are.”

A thrill of terror shot through Hejinmal’s body.

He was far too relaxed. He was talking as though he had picked up a stone from the ground. It was a tone which demonstrated his confidence in being able to do what he spoke of.

And then, in the moment when he saw the Elder Lich raise his hand—

“[Grasp—”

“WAIT!!”

After his thunderous roar, Hejinmal pressed his head to the ground.

This was the greatest degree of respect a Dragon could show — the posture of servitude.

“—Heart], hang on, what?”

Hejinmal desperately pleaded with the Elder Lich, whose hand had stopped moving.

“Please wait! My name is Hejinmal! May I please inquire about your mighty name?”

Looking around, he saw the Dwarf’s jaw drop in shock. However, the Dark Elf and the Elf-like person did not seem surprised. In other words, this was a natural occurrence for them.

Hejinmal was certain his judgement was correct.

“...My name is Ainz Ooal Gown… what is the meaning of that pose of yours?”

“Yes!! I believe this is the proper form of address for when humans know each other’s names, Gown-sama! This posture is is the greatest sign of respect we Dragons can show!”

“Er… Then, why are you doing this?”

“Naturally, it is because I immediately realized that you are an extraordinary person, Gown-sama. Could I possibly take any other position before a mighty being like yourself? No, I could not!”

This was a huge gamble. He had bet everything on it.

The Dwarves used “heated steel” to describe the burning sensation when gambling, but what Hejinmal felt now was a chill that froze him to the core.

Time seemed to freeze over for several seconds, but finally, the Elder Lich said, “Umu. ...So, you intend to submit to me, then?”

“Yes! If you allow it, Gown-sama!”

He peeked again, and as expected, the Dark Elf and the Elf appeared to think all this was normal.

“...There are many uses for Dragon flesh, hide, teeth, scales and the like. Hm? You… raise your head.”

The Elder Lich’s attitude was one that was used to giving orders, so he must have found it natural that even someone like Hejinmal had submitted so readily to him. Clearly, the Elder Lich did not consider Hejinmal worthy of mention.

Dragons were the strongest species, but they were not an invincible species. Many beings could kill a Dragon. Frost Giants were a good example of that.

However, if one compared the two species, in the end, Dragons were probably still stronger.

The reason for that was their growth. Dragons continued growing as time passed, and they would someday grow into the strongest entities of all. They were a very long-lived species, and the fact that they could keep growing throughout it all was a form of strength in itself.

From that point of view, the undead might be even stronger than Dragons. High-level undead did not grow in bodily might, but they could accumulate knowledge and experience.

In addition, Hejinmal had read about legendary undead from his books.

Soul Eaters, which devoured the souls of the living. Wriggle Pestilences, which spread disease. Mage cabals which gathered many undead around a core of Elder Liches. Guphandera=Argoros, the undead dragon that lurked in a mountain of the dead and used psychic-type magic. Astral Rippers, masses of shadows which stalked the Valley of Shadows, and so on.

This Elder Lich must surely be a legendary undead creature whose name had gone down in the history books. However, it would seem the Dwarven libraries had not recorded it.

Hejinmal slowly rose.

He felt like the Elder Lich was appraising his body. He was ashamed by his decidedly un-Draconic frame.

“I see. So Dragons that live in these frigid environments store fat under their skin. Although, I thought Frost Dragons were immune to the cold… Or could it be that you were storing up nourishment in case you couldn’t obtain food?”

“No, it’s not like that. I’m the only one who’s like this…”

“Hooh… That is to say, you’re a rare specimen, then? Is that what you mean?”

Hejinmal was not sure if he had any value for being rare, but there was nobody else in his family like him. Therefore, it was a correct statement.

“That might be so, Gown-sama.”

“Really now,” the Elder Lich said. Then he continued in a quieter tone.

“Killing you would be a waste, then.”

Hejinmal’s keen Draconic hearing picked up those words.

He struggled desperately to keep his breathing under control. It would seem he had made another correct choice, which would permit him to live.

“Are they any other Dragons?”

“Yes, there are. There are four Dragons older than me, six around the same age as me, and nine who are younger than me.”

“Hoh!”

The Elder Lich seemed very happy, but Hejinmal was sure he had some sort of evil scheme in mind.

“How many of them are stronger than you?”

“The four who are older than me are all stronger than me. The Dragons of the same age as me are also stronger than me.”

I might even lose to my younger siblings. Hejinmal could not say that. After all, if his value dropped in the Elder Lich’s eyes, he might be killed on the spot.

“I see. Then, what tier of magic can these elder Dragons use? Are they only capable of arcane spells?”

“The strongest of them can use magic of up to the 3rd tier. As you have said, it is arcane magic.”

As Dragons grew, they naturally acquired the ability to use arcane spells even without going out of their way to learn them. However, they could only cast a few spells. Even Hejinmal’s father could only use three spells of the 3rd tier.

“What? They only have 3rd-tier spells?”

The Elder Lich seemed disinterested, but then he perked up as though he had noticed something.

"No, I should probably ask. What if this is just a ruse? They say that a mighty eagle hides its claws. Is it possible that the strongest Dragon there can use 8th-tier spells?"

"No, it's impossible. Or rather—"

Besides, 8th-tier spells could not possibly exist. Would it be better to tell him that?

No, he could not. The truth sometimes hurt more than lies. If he gave offense to this undead magician, there was no way he would prosper from it.

"—No. He can't possibly use spells of such a high tier. I once heard that he had learned a 3rd-tier spell of flame resistance."

He should probably say that, right? His father was not a foe who should be underestimated.

"Umu — I see. Well, it's only natural that one would want to cover up one's weaknesses."

This nonchalant tone made Hejinmal feel uneasy.

"Aura."

"Yes, Ainz-sama."

It would seem the Dark Elf was called Aura. Judging by her smell, she was probably a female.

The other one who looked like an Elf did not have a female scent about her. In fact, she had no scent at all, much like the Elder Lich.

"I'll give you this Dragon. I recall you said you wanted one?"

"Thank you very much. But can this chap fly?"

Two pairs of eyes looked at him, one filled with doubt, one apparently saying, "That's a good question."

"I, I can probably fly."

He might have been a hikkikomori, but he ought to be capable of flight. Flying was the same as walking for Dragons. There was no way he could forget how to do so. Hejinmal gave that answer as he regretted the fact that he had not flown here.

"Then, I'll take him, Ainz-sama. Hm, then, I need to show him who's the boss around here, and make him obey me completely."

Before Hejinmal could wonder what exactly she was going to do, he felt thousands of frigid razors impale him.

He was dead. There was no doubt that he was dead. The fear which informed his instincts of that fact became invisible blades that pierced his entire body.

In an instant, his mind went blank. In his diminished state of awareness, he clearly felt his heart stop beating.

"Uwaaaaah—!"

As he cried out, it banished the black chill crushing his entire body.

His heart slowly began beating again. His limbs trembled, and his lungs struggled to pull in oxygen.

He recalled something like this from a book somewhere. It was called "murderous intent". In other words, the Dark Elf who would be his Mistress was a being who could radiate murderous intent that was powerful enough to instantly put a Frost Dragon into a near-fatal state of shock.

In that case, what sort of being was the Elder Lich which she called "Master"?

There was no doubt about it. He was beyond Hejinmal's imagination.

He was a being of absolute power — an Overlord.

He had made the right choice.

By the time Hejinmal had come to his senses, he found that the group had backed off, looks of surprise on their faces.

Just as he was wondering what was going on, he realized the disgusting sensation below his waist. As he looked down at his feet, Hejinmal was shocked.

It would seem his bladder had gone slack and he had wet himself. A puddle spread below him like a lake.

"Uuu…"

What should he say now? It was possible that he had displeased them and he would be killed.

"I, I was so overjoyed that I peed a little!"

He had abandoned all delusions of control. Though he had the feeling that they would not believe him, it was better than saying that he had pissed himself out of fear.

"From today onwards, this one shall serve and attend his Mistress, Aura-sama, and offer his utmost devotion and loyalty to her!"

"Ehhhh…"

Hers was an expression of absolute disgust.

This was bad. If she felt he was worthless, he might be discarded like a piece of trash. The mighty could do that. In fact, had his father not done the same thing? However, help came from an unlikely corner.

"I see… Well, that can't be helped."

"Eh? Really, Ainz-sama?"

“Mm. I once heard about something like this from one of my friends一Ankoromochimochi-san. She once told me about how upset she was when her dog peed out of joy. It seems this sort of thing happens when they get too excited.”

“You mean, Ankoromochimochi-sama? Really? So it’s like how Fen and some other magical beasts mark their terrain, then?”

“That might well be. Granted, I’m not too clear on Draconic biology. However, that was probably the reason why that chap did it.”

The being who might or might not have been an Elf had been listening quietly all this while. She tilted her head and asked the Elder Lich:

“Ainz-sama, would it be better if we did it as well?”

“Shalltear. Is it really appropriate to say that?’

“Mm. As Aura said, if you did that, I would collapse in shock. This sort of thing is only cute on small pets. ...Well, Ankoromochimochi-san was worried because that dog was getting on in years. She said something about not getting him too excited… ah, those were the days.”

The air around them changed, to something that was the polar opposite of the murderous intent from just now.

In any event, Hejinmal moved to wipe the soaked portion of his body on a nearby wall and scraped off the stain.

“Say. What will we do next?”

The Dwarf一who had been watching the proceedings in silence一finally spoke up. Hejinmal sensed that this Dwarf was unlike his three companions, in that he was not powerful.

Had the Dwarves hired them as mercenaries and sent this Dwarf to keep an eye on them? If that was the case, Hejinmal would have to show this Dwarf respect as well. Still, where did he rank as their subordinate? What sort of orders would he be given from now on? These uneasy questions flew through his mind.

“You have a point. We’ll leave the Quagoa to Aura and Shalltear. I shall go with this Dragon and eliminate all the Dragons opposing us.”

Hejinmal’s body shuddered again.

He spoke in a casual tone. Dragons were beings which he could take lightly. This was the attitude of the mighty.

Hejinmal hesitated about what to do. It would probably be wise to beg for the lives of the other Dragons. After steadying himself, he spoke:

“...Gown-sama, Aura-sama, may this one be permitted to speak?!”

“Very well. Speak.”

“Understood! A thought occurred to this one. The people here do not know the greatness of Gown-sama. Would you be willing to extend your mercy to those fools? In other words, the other Dragons should know of the glory of Gown-sama!”

“Umu… what do you two think?”

“Everything depends on your will, Ainz-sama.”

“That’s right. We won’t object to any decision you make, Ainz-sama.”

“In any case, all we need to do is chase them out of the Royal Palace, right? Ahem. Dragon, may I ask you a question?”

The speaker was the Dwarf.

Hejinmal glanced at his masters’ faces. In all honesty, he had no idea what sort of attitude he needed to take towards this Dwarf. That said, acting arrogant would be very dangerous. However, a servant who bowed and scraped before others would devalue their master.

"Please do."

After hesitating, Hejinmal chose a short reply to avoid offending either side.

"Umu… Still, I didn't expect you could completely dominate a Dragon… No, after seeing that power of yours, it might be natural. Um, sorry. Are there any other Dragons around besides the ones in this place?"

"There might be."

"There might be, huh. Then, if there were, could you order around those Dragons as well?"

"I could not. They belong to a different tribe."

"Umu ― Then we should fulfil the request to chase the Dragons out first. After that, we'll tell them that there are other Dragon tribes around. That way, they'll have to count on Your Majesty's strength to protect their reclaimed Royal Capital. Surely they would not easily surrender this land which they took so long to reclaim. Is that not the most profitable course?"

There was a word there which he could not ignore.

It would seem this Elder Lich was a king of sorts, and his subjects were the Dark Elf and the Elf, perhaps.

"Are you alright with your race being squeezed dry and used up?"

What are you saying, the Dwarf's shrugging seemed to convey.

"Your Majesty has chosen me ― us. Is it not natural that I would pick your side in any dispute?"

"Thank you for your considerations, Gondo."

"Please don't say that. I am the one who should be thanking you. The pain that has plagued me all this time has been wiped away by the few days I have spent with Your Majesty. Truly, you are my savior."

“I am pleased we have forged a mutually beneficial relationship.”

“While I do not feel Your Majesty may benefit from this, I shall surely repay the kindness you have shown me.”

Even Hejinmal the outsider could understand their relationship.

The Dwarf was deeply indebted to the Elder Lich. It was a debt that he would pay even if he had to betray his race.

“...If you feel that way, then I don’t mind…”

The Elder Lich shrugged and turned to Hejinmal.

“Alright. Then, take me to the Dragons you say are stronger than you. Also, where is the treasury of the former Dwarven Royal Capital?”

Hejinmal knew where the treasury was, and nodded confidently.

“This one feels that your question is quite fortunate, because both of them are at the same place.”

◆ ◆ ◆

With his Master and the Dwarf on his back, Hejinmal headed to his father’s location. His body might not have been used to exercise, but it was still a Dragon’s body, and carrying two people posed no problems to him at all.

He listened to His Majesty speak as he walked, and as he did, he was certain that his knowledge and instincts were the most valuable thing in this world.

If he had shown the arrogance typical of a Dragon when they had first met, he would have been slaughtered. No, if he had not loudly proclaimed his allegiance and gained their interest, he would have died without ever knowing what had happened to him.

It had truly been a narrow escape.

Hejinmal clenched his slackened bladder.

If he peed himself again, their opinion of him would not just drop to rock bottom, it would grab a shovel and continue digging underground.

Fortunately, they had not encountered any other Dragons along the way. Thus, they proceeded directly to his father's room — or rather, the throne room cum treasury.

Hejinmal took a deep breath.

"Your servant wishes to inform Your Exalted Majesty that apart from my father, there are three Dragons there who serve as his concubines. Will you be bringing that Dwarf in there with you?"

If they were assailed by the freezing breaths of four Frost Dragons at once, he feared the Dwarf would be slain.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all. If Your Exalted Majesty feels it is fine, then naturally your servant has no objections."

"I have granted him immunity to freezing cold, so it should be fine. However, it might be a little troublesome if we are subjected to numerous area-effect spells of other elements."

"Your servant feels that will not be a problem, Your Exalted Majesty. Breath weapons are the favored attacks of Dragons, and it is natural for them to open combat with their breath. They would not consider using their arcane spells, which are far weaker."

"Then it's not a problem."

"Ah, Your Majesty. May I say something? Certainly, there is no way a mere four Dragons could begin to oppose Your Majesty. However, it would seem this one's mother is in there. Could I ask you to spare her?"

"Hm…"

Hejinmal tilted his neck and awaited his Master’s judgement.

Hejinmal had not intended to go so far as to ask for his mother to be spared. It would be good if she could be saved as he had been, but he did not want to bet his life on it. It was not that he hated her, but simply that the bonds of familial kinship were not very strong among Dragons.

After leaving the nest, even their own siblings would become rivals for living space. In addition, it was common for the treasure-loving Dragons to fight when they saw each others’ troves.

It was very rare for many Dragons — particularly those who had left the nest — to live together in one place. It would never happen at all without an overwhelmingly powerful Dragon to gather them.

In that sense, his father Olasird’arc — who had united everyone as a family against external enemies — was an anomaly. One might even call him wise.

“It can’t be helped. I shall try to let your mother survive.”

“Thank you very much, Your Exalted Majesty.”

The words of praise immediately fell from his mouth, because he did not wish to displease the person showing him such largesse. In addition, he mused that if his mother survived, the burden on him might decrease in the future. On the contrary, if there were more Dragons, his own rarity would decrease. If he did not want them to think his death would not be missed, he would have to do everything he could to please them.

“Still, Your Exalted Majesty seems a bit too… eh. From now on, you may use Sorcerer King or Ainz as well.”

Was it a trap, or was it a test? Without hesitation, Hejinmal spoke the words he felt were correct:

“Understood, Your Majesty, the Sorcerer King!”

How could he omit the respectful terms of address which Ainz was due?

“Mm, let’s go.”

“Understood!”

He carefully hid his quiet sigh of relief .

It was a test, after all. If he had been careless and failed to pay him the proper respect, he would surely have been punished appropriately. For all he knew, he might have been killed and then dissected.

If there was one thing Hejinmal had engraved into his heart, it was that he must never be arrogant.

Soon, they reached the doors leading to their destination.

They were a set of double doors that looked like they needed a Dragon’s strength to open. Apparently, the Dwarves used a set of smaller doors beside it to enter or leave. The huge doors were only used for ceremonies and the like.

Hejinmal pressed his shoulder against the doors and applied force一mindful not to dislodge his Master from his back一and pushed the doors open.

He saw his father一Olasird’arc一coiled on his Golden Throne. His mother Kilystran and the other two concubines一Munuinia and Mianatalon一were also present.

Three pairs of puzzled eyes trained themselves on Hejinmal. One more pair looked in a different direction一at the people mounted on his back. That last pair belonged to his mother, Kilystran.

Before anyone else could speak, Hejinmal shouted:

“He who sits upon my back is the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown! He is the king who shall rule this land and us Dragons!”

Strictly speaking, he was the servant of Aura the Dark Elf. However, it would be easier for them to understand this way, and in any event, he had made this declaration after seeking and receiving permission to do so.

Silence filled the room as the words faded. It took some time for the other Dragons to parse the words Hejinmal had just said.

“Have you gone mad, you little whelp?!”

In an instant, his father’s anger boiled over.

That was only natural. His father was the lord of this land. —No. The *former* lord. Thus, it was a natural reaction for him.

He rose from his coiled position and took a fighting stance that would allow him to pounce right away.

Hiiiieee!

In truth, it was very scary.

Between himself and Olasird’arc, there was no doubt that his father was stronger. It was not simply a matter of might and toughness, but there was also a vast difference in terms of battle experience. In addition, Olasird’arc’s body was also leaner and more conventional, in comparison to Hejinmal’s.

Saying that Hejinmal had no chance of victory was stating the obvious.

However, he had no choice but to make that declaration. According to Hejinmal’s books, no follower would ever make their master state their identity.

Therefore, he secretly looked at his father with an expression which said, “it wasn’t my idea”. However, it was completely ignored. The angry glare was targeted at Hejinmal alone. In the eyes of his father, who believed that Dragons were the strongest race of all, people like his Master and the Dwarves were not worth considering.

“—King of Dragons. Will you submit to me in exchange for your life?”

“The hell you say, you damn Skeleton?!”

How could he be a Skeleton! Hejinmal wailed internally.

At the same time, there was a certain indignation, at the fact that he had not picked up on the treasures his Master wore. Perhaps he was so angry that he had not even noticed.

If I hadn't aggravated him, maybe he wouldn't have ended up this way…?

No, that was impossible. For all he knew, it might have been even worse. As Hejinmal's mind whirled with delusions, a look of surprise appeared on his father's face.

"...No, wait. What are those clothes you're wearing?"

Perhaps after calming down somewhat, his Draconic nose for treasure had kicked in.

Hejinmal felt that this was very bad, and he looked around for help. However, all the concubines had the same excited look on their faces, a bestial hunger for treasure in their eyes. Only his mother was trying to surreptitiously leave this place, but she had no intention of helping her son.

"This is the first time I have seen such treasure. If you want me to forgive your foolishness, then offer me your raiment, Skeleton."

"Umu… dealing with fools is truly tiresome."

A cold voice rang forth.

Why did his father's instincts as one of the living not tell him that Death awaited him? It must have been his Draconic avarice at work here.

"You idiot! You've just thrown away the only chance you had to survive! No, I should kill you—"

"[Grasp Heart]."

And with that, his father's body slumped powerlessly to the ground.

All eyes went to the body of the strongest Dragon here.

The way he did not move at all looked like he was sleeping. Of course, that was definitely not the case.

The air in the room turned cold, and the Supreme Being spoke.

“I have no interest in last words. Then, Hejinmal, which of them is your mother? I shall show her mercy and spare her life. As for the others, well, I’m sure there will be various uses for them after we’re done picking them apart.”

“That’s me!”

“That’s me!”

“That’s me!”

Three voices rang out at once. For a moment, Hejinmal almost said “That’s me!” as well.

“...What’s this? Don’t tell me there’s the mother who bore you, the mother who raised you, and the mother who cared for you?”

Hejinmal looked at the two Dragons who were not connected to him by blood.

The two of them were gripped by fear.

Their eyes were clouded over with terror. That too was natural; after all the mightiest Dragon present had just been slain in an instant.

They did not contemplate fight or flight or whatnot. They sprang on the sole chance of survival which presented itself. Much like himself, they had made the most correct choice to live on.

Their fearful eyes looked towards Hejinmal, trying to ingratiate themselves with him. How would they react if he said, “No, I only have one mother”? His absolute master would surely slay the other two without any hesitation.

Currently, the power of life and death over the other two Dragons rested in Hejinmal's hands. However, he could not take delight in this. All he felt was a tremendous sympathy for others in the same situation as himself. At the same time, he planned to have his "mothers" owe him favors for a long time to come.

"It is as you say, Your Majesty. I have three mothers!'

"Is that so? What a shame. However, a promise is a promise. Alright, I shall spare them… Still, is there only one Dragon corpse? Dragons are far too useful. One does not seem quite enough… What a shame."

After peeking around, the three concubines bowed before Ainz in the pose of submission.

"Leave this place and gather all the Dragons here. Then, inform them that you are now under my rule. ...If anyone refuses to accept this, then I will deal with them personally. Now go."

The concubines burst into motion and ran at top speed. It was a speed that either inspired awe in onlookers or frightened them speechless.

Hejinmal did not think for a moment that they might try to escape. In the face of this mighty magic caster, their chances of escape were slim to none. They ought to have realised that as well. No, to Hejinmal, it made no difference even if they escaped. After all, if they did so, he would know how the Sorcerer King would find and deal with them.

Tok. Someone tapped lightly on Hejinmal's head, Turning around, he saw his Master's eyes looking at him.

"I have another order for you. It is a very important order. Gather all the Dwarven books you have, including those you have not yet finished, as well as all the other books outside your room, and bring them to me."

"Yes! I understand! I shall do so at once!"

After nervously setting the two of them down, Hejinmal ran with all his might.

♦ ♦ ♦

“So, they’ve gone.”

Ainz watched as Hejinmal vanished into the distance. He had inquired about how many Dragons lived here from him. Therefore, if the numbers did not add up, it would still be of benefit to him.

There was only one Dragon corpse. After thinking about all the uses he had for it, he wanted more. However, punishing freshly subjugated people who had done nothing wrong for the purpose of generating corpses would violate his ideals of fair reward and punishment.

Kuku, Ainz chuckled.

If they ran, he would hunt them down, kill them, and take back the corpses. As he pondered how to make use of said corpses, Ainz turned his gaze to the glittering pile of gold which the Dragon before him had been lying on.

“That’s a Dragon for you. It’s a veritable mountain of treasure.”

It was nothing compared to Nazarick’s Treasury, but it was still the largest pile of wealth he had seen ever since coming to this world.

There were gold coins, but those were outnumbered by gold-bearing ores, and what looked like raw gemstones.

There was a golden chain over five meters long, a pelt from some beast, golden gloves studded with jewels, a plain staff that looked magical… where had he gotten all these things from?

Perhaps only the Dragon that had become a corpse knew.

“Umu, hardly any brass or fool’s gold. So most of that is natural gold? Is that a Dragon’s sense of smell at work…”

Gondo muttered all that to himself as he studied the glittering ores. *Are those any different from gold*, Ainz thought, and he resolved himself to properly appraise them once he got home.

“I trust there are no problems with exercising my victor’s rights over the Dragon’s hoard?”

“Those rights are yours, of course. However, how about trying to open that while nobody’s around?”

“Huhu. You’re quite the villain.”

“It’s purely for research, of course. Then, please tell me if there is anything you desire, Your Majesty. According to that Dragon, there’s no ledger of treasure or anything, but it might not be good to take a Dwarven treasure that’s too famous.”

“Why not say the Dragon took it?”

“If that happens, they might request that Your Majesty return the Dragon’s hoard, no? While I don’t think the Council will say anything to Your Majesty, it would be best not to sow the seeds of future conflict, don’t you think?”

“It is as you say. Then, I shall open the door to the entrance. It’s better if less people know about what will happen.”

“Please, Your Majesty.”

Ainz and Gondo went about their respective business.

First, Ainz used [Gate] to bring over his Eight Edge Assassins.

“—I have an order for you. Search this palace, hidden rooms included, and bring all the books you find to this place. If you meet any Dragons, say you are my subordinates. If you are attacked, you may kill them. However, avoid making the first move. Also… while I doubt there are any around, there might be powerful beings present, so move in groups. If you encounter any such entities, prioritize bringing that information back to me.”

Since the books were written in Dwarven, only Gondo could understand them, so Ainz had no choice but to let him read them.

As he watched his subordinates disperse through the Royal Palace, Ainz chucked the Dragon corpse through the [Gate].

Mm, first I'll harvest all the materials, and then process them. And then, if the Dragon is willing to accept resurrection, I'll have another batch on hand. Though I doubt that's likely...

As Yuri Alpha of the Pleiades looked at him, he ordered her to store the corpse on the 5th Floor. In order not to let the corpse rot, he ordered her to put it on ice.

"Your Majesty! There are no signs that it was opened. It would seem the treasures should still be in place."

"Really now. Then I shall open it."

He bade Yuri farewell, and after the great doors closed, Ainz stood before the entrance to the Treasury.

As he recalled his YGGDRASIL days, elation soared in Ainz's chest. It had always been an exciting experience to encounter a treasure chest-shaped drop. Even if there was only a single data crystal inside, one would not know before opening it. He felt that same excitement now.

Howeverー it was forcibly negated.

Every time his joyous emotions were cancelled, it gave rise to some measure of displeasure. Even so, it still enlivened him somewhat.

Ainz took out a magic item which looked like a board.

It was an artifact: Epigonoi.

(TL Note: 七门之粉碎者, Shatterer of the Seven Gates)

It was a magic item which could only be used seven times, but it possessed the lock-opening abilities of a level 90 thief.

It was very valuable, and he did not want to use it if possible, but he had not summoned any vassals with high-level lock-opening abilities. The Eight Edge

Assassins were specialized in stealthy combat, and they had very poor lock-opening abilities.

“It can’t be helped.”

Ainz — who very rarely used any rare items he obtained — decided to use it after some waffling. It would seem that he was looking forward to the treasures within.

He touched the artifact to the Treasury door, and activated its power.

As they peeked through the slit of the opening door, Ainz and Gondo clenched their fists.

Neither of them said anything, but their expressions said everything.

The glitter of gold was little more than a trick of the light. Without any light, it would not shine. However, what they saw was a massive pile of treasure that seemed to shine from within. Unfortunately, the word “tidy” could not be applied to it.

“...Amazing.”

Much like the Dragon’s hoard, the Dwarven trove could not compare to that of Nazarick, but to Ainz, it was also a commendable sum.

Ainz picked up a gold coin. He had never seen coins like this before, and it did not look like the gold pieces used for trade nowadays. However, it did not feel like it was Dwarven-made, simply because of the profile of a human carved onto its surface.

“They say that in the past, the Dwarves traded with the huge human nation which ruled the area around this mountain range. This must be a portrait of the ruler of that nation. Runesmiths flourished then; it was their golden age.”

“Umu.”

Ainz flicked the coin from his fingers, dumping it into the pile of treasure. Gold clinked against gold, producing a crisp sound that pleased the ears.

“Then, please excuse me for a moment while I look for technical manuals and any items made by runesmith researchers, and so on.”

“Do so. I will look around myself.”

Pandora’s Actor would probably be very happy to see this.

As he recalled his bizarre attitude, the mental image of Ainz making sure the Treasury’s door was properly locked came to mind.

He saw armor and weapons seemingly buried by gold pieces. Would that not damage them? Why did they not mind that damage?

I see, if it was neat and tidy, then any thieves who got in could quickly find the treasure they were looking for. So instead they messed things up? If that’s the case, then they might use that old dodge as well…

“Gondo, I have something to ask you. Is it possible that there is a secret door under this mountain of treasure?”

Gondo looked back in surprise.

“I see! ...It’s not impossible, but even if there were, it would be very difficult to find. After all, we would have to move out all the treasure in here.”

At the very least, they would need to move the gold coins.

“Then, we could estimate the distance from this level to the one below, and if there’s a discrepancy in height we’d be right, then?”

“I feel that even if one wanted to put in a secret chamber in this place, it wouldn’t be anything more than a sliding secret door to hide several pieces of treasure. Measuring thickness would also be quite difficult. Also, since this is the Treasury, the walls and floor would naturally be thicker.”

Gondo’s gaze seemed to be asking what they should do next, but Ainz shook his head. Frankly speaking, taking the items from here felt like a complimentary gift. It seemed a waste to go to too much effort for it.

“That is not our reason for coming here, and we do not know if it really exists. Wasting too much time and effort on it would be foolish. In any event, once the Dwarves come to reclaim their city, we will have them serve as witnesses and buy those items at their proper price.”

“I understand. Then I shall go and see if our objective is in this place.”

Gondo began searching again, and Ainz picked out several items which seemed more magical than others.

“Hm? This is…?”

Among those items, Ainz discovered a sword.

It might well be the most magical item out of everything here.

“Umu… going by levels, it would be around level 50, then?”

It was long enough to be considered a longsword, and it was intricately decorated.

He was not sure if this was made in YGGDRASIL. But if it was an item of this world, then its magical power would beggar belief. Ainz felt the body of the sword. It was smooth and even.

“What a beautiful and exquisite sword. But there are no runes carved on it. How could that be?”

Ainz gripped its hilt. In that instant, the sword vibrated. It felt as though mana was flowing through it.

“This is… something even I can use?”

Ainz could not use longswords due to his class restrictions. However, it would seem this sword had been imbued with some sort of magic which waived that restriction.

“Interesting.”

After swinging it several times, Ainz casually poked his hand with it.

There was no pain. It would seem Ainz's immunity to attacks below level 60 was still in effect. It did not have the special magic that was imbued into Gazef's sword.

Having lost some of his interest, Ainz cast a spell.

"[Greater Magic Item—"

"Your Majesty! How goes the search? Did you find anything interesting?"

"—Several articles, but I'll decide which one I want to take afterwards."

"Is that so? I"ll leave you to it, then!"

Now that Gondo's call had interrupted the spell, Ainz tossed the sword back into the pile.

While a sword which he could wield was quite interesting, given his present circumstances, it was nothing more than that. Any item Ainz took from here would have to be more special and beneficial.

Is that the calibre of the magic items here? What a shame. Well, I guess I shouldn't have been hoping for a World-Class Item or whatnot.

Ainz continued searching, and an item caught his eye.

"Gondo, I've made my selection. I'm not sure if this is a national treasure, but could you come over and help me take a look?"

Part 4

“Then, let’s begin.”

After saying that to Shalltear , who was standing beside her, Aura unfurled the scroll一the World-Class Item she had brought with her一and activated its power.

[Depiction of Mountains and Rivers].

Simply put, it was an item that sealed a target into a closed-off space. To be more precise, it swapped a painted landscape with the real world, and then it would convert the real world into a painted landscape.

The definition of “target” in this case was the same as that of the super-tier spell [Change The World], and referred to a specific area. Nothing within that area一animate or inanimate一could resist its effects.

This time, she was going to trap everything within this gigantic cave into the otherworld created by [Depiction of Mountains and Rivers].

Shalltear and Ainz were protected by World-Class Items, so they would not be imprisoned within the otherworld. Instead they would appear in the painted landscape which substituted for the region of devoured reality. However, as the item’s user, Aura would automatically be sucked in.

This painted world was almost the same as the real world, with nothing strange or outstanding within it. However, it was fundamentally an illusion. Without the power of [Depiction of Mountains and Rivers], once one exited the target area, everything would vanish into mist. In other words, any treasures gained from within the painted world would also dissolve into mist.

Of course, the two of them had entered this oublietted segment of reality of their own volition. Normally speaking, World-Class Items could not affect holders of other World-Class Items, but it would be a different matter if those holders accepted that influence. All that was thanks to a patch from the devs.

One could choose from 100 otherworlds to overlay onto the targeted portion of reality.

For instance, there were lethal lava lands which dealt ongoing fire damage, boreal landscapes which dealt ice damage, thunder plains that rained down lightning strikes at periodic intervals, monsoon regions where visibility was practically zero, or mist-shrouded worlds, as basic options.

The strange thing was that there were also battlefields which could be overlaid. After a certain period of time, a sizable number of reinforcements would show up to attack the enemy. However, these troops would only be about 60% as strong as their opponents, so they were generally limited to depleting the enemy's resources.

If one-on-one confrontations were desired, one could instead face the enemy with an equal number of stronger entities, each of which had 80% of the user's power. Due to this ability, it was quite useful if one's opponent was to defeat the foe.

The most fearsome aspect of this item was not drawing people into an otherworld, but that it allowed the user to choose which targets would suffer its effects. The user could also choose these effects. In other words, even if the user created a region of molten lava, they could exempt chosen people from the fire damage it inflicted.

However, it had its weaknesses.

Unless specific otherworlds were used, one of 40 escape routes would be randomly chosen during each activation, and if the enemy managed to escape via that route, ownership of the item would transfer to the enemy. Of course, none of these escape routes were simple, but the fact that one could seize the item without defeating its holder meant that obtaining it was easier than most other World-Class Items.

This time, Aura chose one of those specific otherworlds, a simple region of sealed-off space.

Besides being trapped, the enemy would not suffer any deleterious consequences. However, there was only one specific way to escape from this place.

“Alright, Hanzo, I want you to block off the escape route from this world. It’ll be troublesome if any of them got away. Lean over a bit.”

The Hanzo leaned over from his hiding place in the shadows, and paid close attention to Aura’s explanation of the escape route.

Although Aura had not detected any ambushers nearby, it paid to be careful.

“Then, Aura. How many more people have entered this world after the others?”

“Hm? Only two people.”

That answer meant the enemy did not possess World-Class Items. They breathed a sigh of relief.

Shalltear looked around the residences of the old Royal Capital. It was a large city, but it was quiet, as though its citizens had all fled.

They had to quickly capture the Clan Lord, the ruler of the Quagoa, and convey the Supreme Being’s words to him. However, their visibility was impeded by the houses and they could not find the place where he was staying.

“Can you burn those houses away?”

“Hm? I can’t. However, I could create a hazardous environment to deal damage over time. For instance, if there were a line of log houses, we could create a lava region and burn them to ash.”

“That might kill them all, so you can’t do that.”

“Yeah. Still, I could activate it briefly and deal with everyone who survived… but it would be a shame if their ores melted.”

The Quagoa fed their children metal and the like, so there ought to be large quantities of metal or raw ore and minerals lying around. Destroying them would be a waste, and Shalltear agreed.

“Besides, Ainz-sama’s order was to see if they were willing to flock to our banner.”

“And then he said that if they refused, we would cull their ranks to a specific amount.”

“...Shalltear.”

After seeing Aura narrow her eyes, Shalltear realised what she was getting at.

“It’ll be fine! I won’t mess up this time! I ab-so-lute-ly won’t mess up!”

“If only that were the case.”

“I think I get it now. You have to use your head. Shall we?”

“Mm, let’s go. Then, can I leave the thinning of their numbers to you?”

“I think I’m more suitable for that task. Are you okay with that?”

Aura’s strength was tied up in her magical beasts, so she was not as good at this sort of thing.

“Yeah… If Mare were here, he’d trigger an earthquake and wipe a whole bunch of them out.”

“That boy has the strongest area attacks in Nazarick. I’m pretty confident in that field, but my power is limited in a place like this.”

Speaking of which, using an earthquake to obliterate them would not fulfil their master’s command of “selection”. If she could do that, then she could simply summon her familiars to perform an indiscriminate massacre.

“So you’ve already received orders like that? All these tasks were for you to learn, Shalltear.”

Aura repeated the orders their master had handed down many times.

“That’s true,” Shalltear replied, and then she mentioned something she had been thinking about for a while.

“Judging by the strength of the enemies we’ve encountered so far, it doesn’t look like there’s anyone here who could defeat a Death Knight. Then, could it be that they were beaten by chance? It’s more likely that they used an item or defeated them with a summon that was later recalled… It’s quite rare that Ainz-sama’s predictions are wrong.”

Shalltear realised Aura was staring at her. She did not want to ask why she was doing so.

“What? Did I miss something?”

“It’s not like that… hm… ahhhh. What a dummy~”

A look of displeasure crossed Shalltear’s face.

If she had missed something out, then why not just tell her directly? It was a while before Aura gave her answer.

“Say一how could Ainz-sama make that sort of mistake?”

“Was getting the Death Knights defeated part of Ainz-sama’s plan? It’s true that Death Knights made by Ainz-sama have very high stats. Nobody we’ve encountered so far should have been able to defeat them…”

Aura thumped her fist into her hand. “Is that possible too?” she wondered.

“I see. So it’s possible that he intentionally let the opposition kill the Death Knights. I didn’t think that far ahead, but I wanted to say that ‘his predictions weren’t wrong’. The Death Knights went down with the bridge, but I think they died from the fall. Their footprints were there when we passed through that fortress, but they weren’t there on the other side. In other words, they were defeated halfway through. That means, there’s only one reason they could have died.”

“If that was the case, does that mean this has exceeded Ainz-sama’s predictions?”

"I told you, it's not like that. If Ainz-sama was talking to you seriously, it might be like what you said, Shalltear."

"What do you mean by that?"

Shalltear knitted her brows, unable to understand. Aura went "Ahhhhh!" and stomped her feet.

"What do you mean, 'what do you mean by that? I told you, right? Ainz-sama already knew that the Death Knights died from falling into the Great Rift."

"Ehhh?!"

"Haaa… why don't you think about what happened back then? You see, when Ainz-sama was explaining things to you, I wanted to ask if the Death Knights had been pushed to their deaths, but Ainz-sama looked right at me and ordered me to be quiet. Didn't you notice? It was in the moment when he gave his instructions."

Shalltear blinked in surprise. She *had* seen her master make that gesture. At first, she had thought it was because he wanted Aura to keep quiet because he was saying something. However, that Supreme Being was a genius strategist, so Aura's explanation was more likely as opposed to her potentially flawed reading of the situation,.

Still, if that was the case, why had he explained all that to her?

"What kind of face are you making? Think about it a little and you'll know."

Aura's absentminded words made Shalltear's heart shrink like it was being tossed around in a whirlpool.

"Could it be… for me? Did he do that on purpose to train me? Is that what you mean?"

"...What other answer could there be? Along the way, you said there could be a strong enemy and asked Ainz-sama many things. If you knew they had fallen into the Great Rift, would you have asked so much? Ah, can you keep this a secret from Ainz-sama? It's all because you doubted Ainz-sama…"

"You say I doubted Ainz-sama's ability? How could that be?"

Shalltear hoped that she could keep quiet about how she had come out and said that she did not trust the prowess of a Supreme Being.

"Well, just keep it a secret. Just as Ainz-sama wanted me to keep it a secret from you, you have to watch your lips too."

"Of course."

When one reflected calmly on this, Aura had committed a mortal sin, that of ignoring a Supreme Being's orders. However, that was because she felt Shalltear had shown disrespect to the Supreme One...

So was it me or Aura who was rude to the Supreme Beings? Or was it neither of us? Hm—

Shalltear's head ached, and she decided to stop quibbling and not brood about the matter of keeping secrets.

"...Still, isn't that a sign of disrespect in itself? Hm…"

"...Hm — speaking of which, if they don't submit to Ainz-sama, he said something about cutting them down to about 10'000 people. While he did say to spare some of the females, what about the children?"

"Did he specify to leave a certain amount alive?"

"Although, don't they get stronger by eating metals as children? And if we're going to rule them, wouldn't children be easier to brainwash? Shalltear—"

An evil grin appeared on Aura's face.

"If Ainz-sama didn't leave any specific instructions, that means… it's a test, right? While we could always send the Hanzos to ask for directions, Ainz-sama said he left it to you, right? So I think Ainz-sama wanted to see how you would deal with it… Can our Number One Floor Guardian take good care of this task?”

Shalltear smiled thinly by way of reply. She had been thinking about this ever since she had been given her orders.

“”4’000 males and females and 2’000 children ought to be enough.”

“Hm? Hm一I guess. You seem to be handling this pretty easily一hm?”

Aura fell silent and cupped her hand to her ear. Shalltear knew what she was doing and kept as quiet as possible. In the end, she was all smiles.

“Ah, I heard what sounded like a large group of Quagoa making their move.”

“Are they fleeing, or are they deploying their forces?”

“I can’t be perfectly sure because I’m going by sound, but they don’t sound like they’re running away. It’s more like they’re dispersing outside the city.”

Apparently, there were 80’000 Quagoa here. Demihumans were the kind who grew stronger with age. In other words, everyone was a soldier. If they mobilized over 10’000 people but deployed them within the city, their advantage in numbers would be cut down by half.

While the intruders were so few they did not qualify as an army, they possessed incredible fighting power. The matter of the Dragon should have spread throughout the Quagoa. If that were the case, the smarter people would lead the others outside the city to evacuate, while setting up in formation to lure the enemy into the city for a fight. If a small number of enemies moved into the city, the Quagoa could surround the city and mount waves of attacks to tire them out before dealing the finishing blow with a team of elite warriors. That seemed like the most appropriate battle strategy.

In any case, one needed a wide, open space to deploy a large force.

Shalltear was hoping for just that.

“They’re over there. Then, we should begin negotiations now.”

"Of course. We need to work hard so we don't keep Ainz-sama waiting."

◆ ◆ ◆

Over 60'000 battle-capable Quagoa were formed up and waiting for the enemy.

Female Quagoa who were not pregnant or bearing children were just as good at fighting as the males, which was how they had managed to mobilize these numbers. Still, despite mustering a force bigger than any in recorded history, Clan Lord Pe Riyuro was not happy at all.

This was far too strange. The cave which contained the Royal Capital had suddenly been wreathed in mist.

What on earth was going on?

The battle-ready troops began lining up, facing the Royal Capital. If the enemy feared their numbers and did not come out, then that would be the best case. Therefore, they took the minimum provisions with them, and left their Dwarven treasures behind. As long as their enemy was not stupid, they would see that there was no point in fighting.

However, someone emerged from the Royal Capital.

One of them was dressed in red armor, and another was a dark-skinned shorty that was not a Dwarf.

According to the ones who had watched the encounter with the Dragon outside the Royal Capital, there should have been two more, but they did not see them. They must have been grabbing treasure, while these two were buying time for them.

"In any case, just to confirm, that is not a Golem right?"

"Yes, it's not a Golem."

According to Yozu, the Golems were tall of stature and wore black armor. So that suit of red armor was something else. However—

Perhaps that's a type of Golem. It might be better to think of it that way. Still, why did they come out to face an army in the tens of thousands head-on? Is it because they're confident of killing us all — No way, it can't be. That's impossible.

Riyuro shook his head to disperse the horrific image that had appeared within it.

He could guess that the opposition possessed unimaginable power, given that they had created this bizarre dimension. The fact that they could make a Dragon prostrate before them without a fight also suggested they were very strong.

Still, his side numbered over 60'000. It was completely incomparable to having only hundreds or thousands of people. There was no way to fight this many opponents.

However, if they were Golems, then it was understandable.

Golems did not tire like living beings. They could fight forever, and if they were strong enough to defeat Riyuro, then they could theoretically kill everyone here.

Still, that was merely theoretical.

Even if only one out of several Quagoa dealt damage through a lucky hit, over the course of thousands of rounds of fighting, the accumulated scratch damage would result in injuries that could take the enemy out of commission.

Numbers were strength. With his army of 60'000, as long as they fought on the ground, they should even be able to slay a Dragon Lord.

"—I'll go talk to these people. You wait here. If I'm killed… Well, do as you please."

"It's too risky," one of his advisors said, stating the obvious.

"...We can't talk to Golems, so I'll talk to the one beside it. It would be bad if we didn't find out their objective, at least."

In any case, Riyuro was determined to attempt a dialogue.

The enemy must be strong. That being the case, he would ask them their objective. If they could be reasoned with, then he would not mind paying a certain price. If they could chase off the Dragon Lord, then acknowledging them as their new masters would also be fine. Even if that was impossible, he could pay them more than the Dwarves did in exchange for switching sides.

"Nobody must follow me. If a lot of us come at once, it might trigger hostilities."

Without saying anything more to his aides, Riyuro stepped forth.

His troops parted on both sides of him, and the opposition seemed to have noticed that someone was coming. He could see the enemy had stopped to observe his movements.

"Sorry for the wait."

Riyuro was the first to speak, and his voice made the enemies look at each other.

He looked around. As expected, there was nobody else around. There were two other people from that face-off with the Dragon ー the Dwarf and the skull-helmeted chap ー neither of which was here.

"Hm? Who're you?" the dark-skinned shorty replied.

It would seem the red-armored one was a Golem. It seemed paler and taller than the humanoid next to it. Still, at a glance, there was no telling that it was an artificial being ー it looked very realistic.

"I am Pe Riyuro, Lord of the Quagoa Clans who live in this place. And you ー who might you be?"

“We are under orders from the Supreme Overlord who has come to this land in order to rule you.”

It spoke!

The red-armored one spoke. Since he heard that Golems could not speak, it was obviously not a Golem.

Trying to hide his consternation, Riyuro replied:

“Rule?”

“Correct. Our Lord has come to subjugate you. Bend the knee and bow before him.”

Then, what should I do? Riyuro thought fast.

He did not mind bowing and welcoming a new ruler. All they needed to do was grow strong beneath that ruler and then overthrow them.

The problem was that they could not submit to the opposition without knowing their power. They might have made that Dragon kneel before them, but that Dragon was not the Dragon Lord. For all he knew, after bending the knee, they might be made to fight the Dragon Lord.

“...There should be two more of you. What happened to them?”

“You do not need to know. You are only allowed to say if you accept our rule or not.”

They were not revealing anything to him. That would mean that investigating the enemy’s intentions — whether or not they truly intended to fight in earnest — was very important.

“...You say you want to rule us. However, it is very difficult for us to accept your proposal without knowing your strength. Does that make sense to you?”

In other words, he was implying that “if you tell me how strong you are, I don’t mind being ruled by you.” However, the two of them merely looked at each other and shrugged.

“Is that so. Our orders state that if you will not accept our rule, we are to reduce your numbers until you are forced to bend the knee. After that, you are to kill yourselves until there are only 4’000 males, 4000 females and 2000 children left. You should be able to differentiate who is more valuable, am I correct?”

“Then, once there are only 10’000 of you left, we will take you back to our country, the Sorcerous Kingdom, where you will be put to work.”

Fear coursed through the Clan Lord for an instant.

It was not because of the cruel content of the message. It was because they had delivered it in a matter-of-fact tone that was completely devoid of arrogance.

He felt that these two people could actually do it.

Yes.

These two people could kill an army of over 60’000.

Were they mad? Were they overconfident? Or—

That unbelievable attitude left Riyuro at a loss for what to do next.

They could not listen to such insane orders without so much as a fight.

Perhaps they had sensed the hostile intent from his side, but the two of them looked at each other, and their faces twisted into grins.

The Dwarves were hairy, so he could understand them. These two people had no hair except on the tops of their heads, so he could not read their expressions. Such was the gulf between two different species.

“W-wait—”

He could not finish his request for them to wait.

"—Then, I shall now begin reducing your numbers to an acceptable level. That being the case, do not give your clothes to anyone else."

Normally speaking, the Quagoa did not wear clothes. After all, they were covered in fur from head to toe.

However, a king needed to show his authority, and thus he needed something to easily differentiate himself from others. That was why he wore clothing and a crown made by Dwarves, with the sigil of the Clan Lord. At the same time, he could let others wear them to serve as doubles for him, in order to deceive enemies from other races.

Had they seen through that plan and thus tried to cut him off halfway?

Taking out the enemy leadership to cripple the enemy army was the most obvious victory condition. However, why had they not done that?

No, that's not it. There's another reason for that… Could it be… That must be it. They're not trying to kill me, they're trying not to kill me by accident!

The differences between species ran very deep. However, as long as he wore his clothes, they could tell who the Clan Lord was and thus they would spare him. That was the meaning of their haughty declaration.

"Then, isn't it about time you went back? We will start once your side moves towards us. I would be glad if you picked out the ones you wanted to survive before that."

"Hurry up and go back."

They waved him off, indicating that he should return. In other words, there was no need to negotiate any further.

This was far too different from his expectations.

I told them I was willing to bend the knee, but why couldn't they make even a little concession? If they aren't even willing to do that… does that really mean they view our lives as worthless…?

In the face of this arrogance, the Clan Lord struggled to suppress the terror overflowing from this heart.

In any case… they can't possibly cut the 60'000 people here down to 10'000… Yes. That must be it. They must have lost their minds after seeing our forces!

Under normal circumstances, that sort of thinking would be correct. Even Dragons could not reduce their numbers by such large amounts.

In that moment, realization struck the Clan Lord.

Could it be that they intend to mount flying hit-and-run attacks?

If they fought like Dragons, then things would be very tricky.

Deploying in a wide open area like this would be detrimental instead.

Then, should he pull his forces back to the residential district?

However, that would be very dangerous. If the enemy could destroy buildings, then it would cause great damage to their homes. In the end, this was the only place they could fight.

After returning to his troops, the Clan Lord gathered his aides.

"Was that a Golem? ...What happened? You look very uncomfortable."

His expression must have frightened the other two. The Clan Lord patted his face and gave his orders.

"Ahh… In any case, gather the Blue and the Red Quagoa."

"Will they be a personal guard?"

"Not just that. Gather all the exceptional individuals of each Clan together."

♦ ♦ ♦

Riyuro gave voice to a mighty cry. It was a cry infused with the skill he had obtained when he had ascended to the position of Clan Lord. As he saw his army of over 10’000 charge the enemy in response to the cry, he even felt a little pleased. However, the results of that charge were too horrible to watch. Like a flow of water striking a wall, the charging soldiers struck an invisible barrier and were sent flying.

What splashed everywhere was not frothy water, but Quagoa — or what used to be Quagoa. Perhaps a sight like this would be fitting of Dragons or Giants, but their opponents were creatures that were even smaller than Quagoa.

“They’re flying…” one of his aides muttered dumbly to himself.

This was not a metaphor. The charging Quagoa were literally flying through the air. Neither did they do so one by one. Several dozens of them were sent flying all at once.

Their pulverized corpses became a shower of meaty chunks which rained down on their comrades. The gore-caked troops continued their charge, whereupon they become lumps of flesh themselves which fell on yet more of their companions. It was a scene straight out of a nightmare.

For some reason, the fact that they could not see any blood spurting made the sight even more surreal.

“What, what the, what the hell is that?!”

Riyuro did not even have the strength to answer his advisor’s mournful cry. His thoughts merely leaked out through his mouth in the form of words.

“This many…”

“Clan Lord! What is that!? It’s nothing like the Golems we saw before!”

They smashed away every single Quagoa charging them in a single blow. This was no longer a battle. It was not even a massacre. It was simply disposal. The comrades he had gathered to increase their influence were now being mangled up in vast quantities like so much rubbish.

“We, we have to run!”

“Where will you run to?!”

He shouted at his panicked aides.

“Where can you run to in this strange dimension?! These people said they’re going to kill us until there’s only 10’000 of us left!”

His aides had nothing to say.

After seeing this overwhelming一this monstrous strength, they understood that their threats were not a joke. While it was hard to believe, they had no choice but to believe it. Out of their 80’000 citizens, only 10’000 would be permitted to survive.

Although he wanted to beg their forgiveness right now, there was no warmth in the eyes of those two. Even that Dragon Lord’s eyes held more compassion.

They have no intention of changing their statement to cut us down to 10’000 people.

“That’s impossible! Clan Lord! What the hell are they? What have the Dwarves brought here?!”

“Why are such tiny people so powerful…”

As he heard his advisors, another flash of inspiration struck Riyuro.

“Could it be that red-armored chap is also a Dwarven weapon? They sent something stronger because they knew the Golems were destroyed?”

“...So if we defeat it, they’ll send something even stronger than that?”

The cries of his men echoed all around. Only the region around Riyuro was silent.

“Let’s pull the men back—”

“Stop! They have to fight! There’s no other way out for us! However strong it is, it’ll get tired eventually! When that happens, we’ll wait until it can’t swing its weapon any more, then force them to negotiate and demand concessions from them!”

“I, I see… But… Will it really get tired?”

He had mentioned something Riyuro had thought of in the corner of his mind. However—

“In any case, as long as it lives, it ought to get tired. It might have more stamina than us, but it’ll definitely get tired. Until then, make it keep swinging its weapon! ...Even if it doesn’t get tired, once it gets bored of killing we might be able to discuss something.”

The Clan Lord was reluctant to speak the words which came next, but they had to be said.

“Besides, we can’t win even if we fight it! Not against a monster like that.”

His troops would not be demoralized to the point of flight. The cry Riyuro had used to sound the charge turned his men into warriors that did not know fear.

Much like the Berserk state of Berserkers, it increased their attack strength but reduced their defense. More importantly, they were immune to all fear-related effects. However, the fact that they would not refuse the Clan Lord's orders no matter how dangerous they were could be said to be a double-edged sword.

The great mass of soldiers continued charging without ever looking back, and they were cut down to half their previous number with such swiftness that hardly anyone could believe it.

At this point, nobody had the strength to speak.

The fact that this tragedy was unfolding before them and it was the doing of one person traumatized their hearts.

All except for one person.

That person — Riyuro — scraped up the last of his courage.

"You chosen heroes!"

He could not raise his voice.

Riyuro saw the Red and Blue Quagoa before him, as well as the other Quagoa with special abilities, all of whom had been formed up into the strongest combat units of the clans.

The reason why none of them responded to Riyuro's cry was because they were all watching that suit of red armor with despair in their eyes.

They too must have felt that they had no hope of victory. When they had first been gathered, their eyes had shone, but now there was no light in their eyes, as though they were dead.

He had chosen not to drive them berserk to preserve their defensive strength, but it had been the wrong decision.

The Clan Lord raised his voice to try and psyche them up.

“You are our ace in the hole! The enemy has killed many of our comrades, so it should be tired! You will be able to make it suffer!”

It ought to be tired — he said that, but there was no sign of it. That red suit of armor showed no signs of stopping as it cut every single Quagoa which charged it to pieces and sent the chunks flying into the air, swinging and thrusting its strange lance-like weapon without end.

“That’s right! No matter what, it’s living, so it’ll get tired! You can do it! Go! Our heroes!”

WIth a prayer in his heart, Riyuro sent out those heroes.

He gave his men orders to clear the path to the red suit of armor. Then, the heroes would assault the red armor—

—Riyuro closed his eyes.

“My, my Lord… Mighty Clan Lord of us all…”

After hearing his aides’ trembling voices, he slowly opened his eyes.

“You… you don’t need to say anything. I know. I, I saw it too…”

Nothing had changed. That was right. It had made no difference.

Just like the regular soldiers, the chosen heroes had been chopped into mincemeat and sent flying as lumps of flesh. And it had all happened in an instant. They had met the same end as the regular soldiers.

“...So… so…”

Riyuro could not say anything else. Although he did not know what that red suit of armor was, it was something which was undoubtedly stronger than a Dragon.

Riyuro could no longer feel anything. If he simply waited quietly for time to pass, the outcome would be as the enemy willed it.

“...said they wanted 2’000 children. Pick out that amount.”

“My Lord…:

“...There’s nothing else we can do. Even if there’s only 10’000 of us, as long as we survive, someday… someday, we can make the Quagoa great again…”

Nobody could say anything in the face of Riyuro’s words. That was because everyone clearly understood in their hearts.

They understood that there was nothing else they could do.

Riyuro’s head drooped powerlessly. It was as though he had been walking in a safe place, and then suddenly ambushed by a monster..

“Speaking of which, what is the Sorcerous Kingdom, anyway? Does it have anything to do with the Dwarves? Someone please tell me…”

His muttering came straight from the heart.

However much he tried to deny it, the carnage before his eyes gave him the feeling that an even greater tragedy would soon come.

Suddenly, he saw his Quagoa servants holding cages, Those were the cages used for storing food lizards. Riyuro knew that now was not the time for this, but the stress on him made him reach out to the cage. He grabbed a live lizard, but just as he was about to bite its head off, an intense pain coursed through his belly, bending his body into a く shape.

There was no way he could beat the absolute ruler who would soon subjugate his race. The idea of flourishing again was so outlandish that even he had nothing to say in its defense. No matter how many generations passed, they would never be able to rise up in revolt. The Quagoa of the Azellisia Mountain Range would forever wear collars in service to their dreaded master.

The wildly-thrashing lizard slipped from Riyuro’s hands and vanished between his men’s legs. Riyuro went “ahh” in what was more a sigh than a shout, and then he collapsed into silent sobbing from sheer misery.

"If you were that strong, you should have said so in the first place! Why, why didn't you tell me!"

The whimpering of the Quagoa Lord, hailed by his people as the greatest ruler in their history, blended with the screams of the children as his own soldiers butchered them.

Part 5

Ainz and Gondo left the treasury together. A flight of Dragons bowed their heads before them. There were 19 of them in total, including Hejinmal.

In other words, all the Dragons Hejinmal had mentioned were here. Now there would be no need to hunt them down.

...It's good that they're all being obedient, but it's a shame that I don't have more Dragon corpses… Should I find some excuse to kill a few more? No, that would be evil. Then why not let them breed and then harvest them later… hm? Isn't that the same thing?

"—Most Exalted Sorcerer King. Your faithful servants have gathered before you."

Hejinmal spoke as Ainz was thinking. Putting aside his contemplations for the moment, Ainz replied:

"Raise your heads."

The kneeling Dragons raised their heads as one.

Due to the massive size of their bodies, they were far taller than Ainz once they rose, but there was no sense of them looking down on him.

However, there were a few surprised looks among them.

They had heard about it, but it was still hard to believe that Ainz had slain the Dragon Lord, their father. Or rather, even Ainz would think the same thing if he were in their shoes. There were many things which had to be seen to be believed.

Just as Ainz was thinking that, one of the Dragons roared.

“I won’t accept this! To think the person who killed Father is actually一what?”

Ainz walked in front of the roaring Dragon. Then he smiled, and beckoned with his hand, as though to say “Give it your best shot.”

The Dragon swiped its claws at Ainz.

They were fast, but not as fast as the Troll he had fought recently.

Ainz did not dodge them. He took the Dragon’s attack head-on. The Dragon -- who thought Ainz could not evade in time -- grinned broadly, but when he realized that Ainz had no need to dodge, that grin froze on his face. After making sure that the Dragon knew that, Ainz cast a spell.

“[Grasp Heart].”

Ainz’s gaze moved from the Dragon who had collapsed like his father, and turned to the others.

“Is there no one else?”

After that quiet query, the Dragons were bowed even lower than they had been earlier, as though they were trying to lie flat on the ground. Nobody here doubted Ainz’s power any more.

Ainz opened a [Gate] and chucked the Dragon’s corpse through it. Then he took Gondo and got onto Hejinmal’s back.

His mother’s back was larger, so mounting would be more suitable for a ruler than taking Hejinmal.

However, Ainz had already ridden Hejinmal all the way here, so he might as well ride him the rest of the way.

“Leave this city. My subordinates should be waiting there.”

The Dragon flight took wing in unison, and the Hanzos led them to a place where many Quagoa were kneeling down.

The sight of countless Quagoa in silent prostration was quite bizarre, and as Gondo saw this, he croaked hoarsely.

Ainz was about to make the same noise himself, but he could not do such a thing in front of his Guardians, whose brightly smiling faces seemed to say, "We worked really hard!"

"Ainz-sama! As you ordered, we've finished the selection from the Quagoa. There are 4'000 males, 4'000 females and 2'000 children. The rest are all corpses. Also, we allowed them to recover the intact bodies and place them elsewhere."

"I see. So they rejected my compassion, but now they cling desperately to their final chance for survival. What a bunch of fools."

The clothed Quagoa kneeling in front of all the others shuddered visibly.

"Then, where is their king?"

"Over there," Shalltear pointed. As expected, it was the trembling Quagoa. Before Ainz summoned him, he activated his halo of obsidian radiance. According to his research, that effect best suited a ruler.

As he listened to the mutterings and whisperings from the Dragon flight, he called out to the Quagoa Lord.

"King of the Quagoa, raise your head."

"Yes!"

The Quagoa Lord's body shook violently as he raised his head. Then, his eyes went wide, and he went still, as though he had been frozen.

Ainz could clearly hear him going "*Hiiiiiiiieee…*"

“...I am known as a merciful king. The sin of not immediately accepting my proposal shall be absolved by the blood of your people. Yet, if you will give your lives and your loyalty to me, I shall guarantee your prosperity.”

“Understood!! We are your servants, and all our children and our children’s children shall grind ourselves to dust in Your Majesty’s service!!!”

“A good answer. It pleases me.”

“Yes!!!! Thank you very much!!!!!”

As though to terminate the conversation, Ainz waved his hand, as though to indicate that the Quagoa Lord could resume his submissive posture.

Excellent! It seems all my practice paid off.

The endless repetition of lines and poses before the mirror had finally borne fruit. After striking a victory pose in his heart, Ainz turned back to his two Guardians, who had flawlessly discharged their duties.

“You have done very well. I am very proud of the two of you.”

“Thank you very much!”

“Your words have cleansed my heart of the shame of my previous mistake, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Hm, hm…”

After seeing Shalltear’s delight, Ainz was sure that he had used the right words.

“Then, is this amount alright? If it’s too much, we can cull them again until their numbers please you, Ainz-sama.”

“No, there’s no need for that… this ought to be a good number. Come to think of it, could any of them become powerful adversaries? Not by our standards, of course, but by those of the people of this world.”

"My deepest apologies. Those people were—"

"No, that's not it. The Clan Lord whom you spoke to was considered quite strong, although we never saw his strength."

"Is that so…"

While he was not sure how the Death Knights had been defeated, it was most likely a coincidence. For all he knew—

They might have fallen into the Great Rift...

As he thought of that, Ainz felt deeply ashamed. Realizing that he had been mistaken after lecturing Shalltear so passionately made his face feel like it was about to erupt in flames — and then, the shame was gone. In its place was a smoldering depression. And then, as he thought about how Shalltear had been taking notes, it deepened — and then he was back to normal.

Should he try to bluff his way through this?

However, if he messed it up, they might tell the others, "Ainz-sama said this, but actually~" and so on.

This is bad! This is really bad! I shouldn't have gotten carried away by my joy and lectured them like that! I feel like crying now.

Ainz sighed deeply.

Well, come to think of it, isn't this a good chance to tell the Guardians that I can mess up too? From there, I can move from the position of an incredibly wise ruler to an ordinary ruler, and that might free me from my emotional torment. And if I do that, the Guardians might notice my mistakes and warn me about them.

He ordered the Dragons to leave, because he knew they had very keen senses. Then, he had the Quagoa move some distance away. Gondo looked very lonely all by himself, but he would just have to bear with it.

Once the three of them were alone, Ainz gulped.

What he would do next might well send all his hard work down the drain. Ainz felt uneasy over how the way the situation would change and what might happen in the future. His body — which knew no fear — started to feel afraid. Despite that, he gathered up his courage to speak.

"Ah, you two, listen up. ...Do you remember what I said about the possibility of a being in this place that could easily defeat the Death Knights?"

The two of them looked at each other, and their faces suggested that they had realised something.

"Yes, that. It seems I was mistaken. Maybe the Dragon I killed could have destroyed the Death Knights, but it doesn't seem like anybody else could."

"I understand, Ainz-sama. Your words were intended to make me learn. To think that you had to disgrace yourself on account of my inexperience… I, Shalltear Bloodfallen, tender my utmost gratitude to your exalted self for your merciful considerations!"

"...Eh?"

Much to Ainz's surprise, they were looking at him with respect in their eyes. In particular, Shalltear's face was flushed red, her eyes were moist, her lips were pressed flat and her mouth was quivering as though she was on the verge of tears.

What part of that deserved respect? It baffled Ainz. Had he touched their hearts in some way?

Also, I should deny what Shalltear said, right? No, Shalltear learned a lot from this journey. Then I'll put my faith in you, Shalltear!

"It seems you realized it, Shalltear."

"Yes!!"

Their eyes seemed to shine even brighter.

Say what—? Ainz thought that, but he still had to clarify himself.

“Still, even I can fail, and I can make mistakes. I hope you will keep that fact in your hearts.”

“Yes! While I don’t think it’s possible for our great ruler to ever make a mistake, I understand, Ainz-sama!”

Shalltear seemed to have reached the limits of her endurance. She sank to her knees and began sobbing. As she clenched her teeth and wept copiously, Aura put her hand on Shalltear’s shoulders, her own eyes brimming with tears. While it was a touching scene which illustrated their friendship, Ainz had no idea what was going on, and all he could think about was where Shalltear — as an undead creature — was secreting her tears, saliva and other bodily fluids from. Thus, he took refuge from reality by thinking about biology.

While Ainz had no idea how things had gotten this way, he decided to leave things as they were for now. Yes, there were far too many things in this world which defied understanding, or rather, they were situations where he had to feign said understanding. That was how he felt when he listened to his CEO explain important cases.

Ainz felt that this was merely kicking the can down the road, but at the same time, he felt that his future self who would encounter the problem again would be a better person. Thus, Ainz did the only thing his present self could do now.

After kneeling down in front of Shalltear, he wiped her tears away, like a parent would for their child.

And then, in that moment, even more tears coursed down her cheeks.

“Ainzsh-shama…”

“Alright, alright. Don’t cry, Shalltear. I told you the same thing back then, didn’t I? You can’t waste your beautiful face on tears.”

“Wash I usheful to you?”

"Yes. You did very well. You were everything I expected of one of my Guardians."

"Ainzsh-shama—~"

Shalltear clutched the material of Ainz's robes.

"Er, erm. Alright, it's about time you stopped crying."

"O-okie…"

Shalltear looked up at Ainz as she breathed in through her nose and tried to wipe her tears away.

"Thank you so much for all the kindness you have shown me!"

"Mm, hm. Alright, then we ought to move on now. There's still a lot to be done, no?"

♦ ♦ ♦

The Council Chamber had been noisy all morning, but after receiving the latest piece of news — it fell silent.

If they were not hugging their heads, they were scratching them. Not a single Dwarf in the room could stay calm.

And then, someone spoke.

"...He's back."

"...Well, that… that was fast. Did he really… really take back the Royal Capital?"

"...Are you trying to find fault with him?"

"What a brave fellow you are, putting yourself at odds with the monster — no, the mighty being — who returned after seizing control of that Dragon's nest of a Royal Palace. I'd say you're as brave as that hero-king from the legends. ...By the way, please tell him that all of us believed in His Majesty from the beginning."

According to the messenger, he seemed to have returned on Dragonback.

Dragons were very strong, and thus they were very proud. They were thus very interested in how anyone could have performed the shocking feat of subjugating such a being.

The obvious explanation was that he had used magic to force its compliance. However, when they took into consideration the matchless might of the Sorcerer King, it was equally plausible that he could have cowed the Dragon into submission by sheer force alone.

No, the latter was more likely. It did not seem like that Sorcerer King needed any magic to rule over Dragons. The absurd mental image of a Dragon kneeling before him in submission even flitted through his mind.

The Director of Food Production sighed deeply, and then he turned a stiff, stern gaze on everyone else.

"Then, what should we do? We're out of time, aren't we? His Majesty has returned. If we don't meet him right away, we'll be in trouble. That means we have to make a decision right away, about that一about the Forgemaster!"

The Forgemaster had fled the country with the metal ingot which the Sorcerer King had entrusted to him.

Needless to say, the act of running away with an item that another country had given to them for the purpose of making something was unforgivable.

This black mark would be visible for all to see when the Dwarven nations made deals with other nations.

It was a fatal blow to a country which traded on its smithing abilities.

Who would commission any work from a country with such a bad reputation? Worse still, it was not an average blacksmith who had run off with the item, but a member of the nation's leadership. It might well be interpreted as the nation pulling strings behind the scenes.

As they imagined the future which might result from this, they began searching, all the while discussing what they should do if they could not find it.

However, none of them could find an answer which would result in the Sorcerer King granting them his forgiveness.

"...I still can't believe he actually ran off with that ingot…" the Cabinet Secretary muttered, but those words had no meaning here. They were long past the point of feeling anything for them

The commander-in-chief looked coldly at the Cabinet Secretary.

"Then what should we do? There's no doubt that he ran away with the ingot. We've also received eyewitness reports of the Forgemaster leaving."

"...Could he have been controlled by the Sorcerer King's magic?"

The room returned to silence in an instant.

Nobody here actually expressed their agreement with the statement, but rather, the commander-in-chief grew more and more displeased.

"Even if you don't want to acknowledge this crime committed by a fellow Dwarf, by one of us, anyone who says that about the person who reclaimed the Royal Capital that we could not… simply put, that person is the scum of the Dwarves."

"—Don't be like that, commander-in-chief. You should know as well; he searched the hardest among all of us, and he's the most tired."

"I don't think the problem can be explained by simply saying that he was fatigued…"

"Well, let's leave non-constructive talk like that for later, Commander-in-chief. We need to make a decision about more important matters now. Should we inform His Majesty right away? I feel it might be better to try and delay things and use the time to continue searching. What do you think?"

The Merchant's Guildmaster shook his head.

"It's a bad move. That leads to the problem of us covering things up. We might as well come clean and beg forgiveness. Besides, have we found him yet? For all we know, he might be in the belly of a magical beast now. If only we could recover the ingot… that idiot."

This was not something they should be saying about a friend, but nobody would speak out against the people rebuking the Forgemaster for causing such a big problem. On the contrary, the commander-in-chief even nodded in approval.

"Fortunately, he didn't take the shortsword as well. But, ah, well, if we apologize… will we be forgiven? ...Well, it's not like we can do anything but apologize."

"It's important to apologize, but it's even more important to state the truth. And after that, all we can do is accept whatever terms he dictates."

Everyone agreed on this.

"Then, what will he demand from us?"

The Dwarves did not know what metal made up the ingot which had been taken, so they could not estimate its value. This, they could not suggest payment in cash terms. If they underestimated the value of the item, they might end up angering the Sorcerer King beyond all hope of their relationship ever recovering.

Therefore, they had to let the Sorcerer King name his price. Still, would he actually ask for money? They imagined that he would ask for something else, but even they could not imagine what exactly he would ask for.

"I can't think of anything. Let's turn it around — what can we agree to? No… what requests should we deny him?"

"Can we even do that? It would be hard, right? This city might have historical value, but we don't have any national treasures of a physical or magical nature."

When the Demon Gods had rampaged through the Royal Capital, only one member of the Dwarven royal family had survived. He was the last king of the Dwarves, known as the "Runesmith King", and after taking powerful magic items with him on his journey, there had been nothing left behind which could be considered national treasures.

"...Oh! I've got it! What about the Treasury within the Royal Capital?"

"We talked about this earlier, didn't we? Saying that sort of thing to the person who reclaimed the Royal Capital for us is just too… Still, it's also true that there's nothing else."

Looking around, everyone nodded in a show of agreement.

"...Hopefully, the Dragons didn't destroy it."

"Don't say that. ...Then, let's invite the Sorcerer King to enter by himself this time."

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Hm? There's one less person. What happened?

There was a strange expression on the faces of all the Dwarves as Ainz entered the room.

The one who spoke for them was—well, they all looked the same to Ainz, so he had no idea who it was. All he knew was that it was certainly not the commander-in-chief. He began with "Thank you for reclaiming the Royal Capital" and launched into a long string of thanks, which made Ainz feel tired. Then, once he had forgotten what they were talking about in the first place, the commander-in-chief's mood changed.

"There is also another matter which we must tender our sincere apologies, Your Majesty. The ingot which Your Majesty entrusted to us has been stolen by the Forgemaster, who fled the nation with it. We are currently searching for him, but we have had no luck in finding him. ...Your Majesty gave us that ingot and your trust, but yet an incident like this occurred on our part. We do not know where to begin apologizing."

The Dwarves bowed as one.

Frankly speaking, Ainz had no idea what was going on. Therefore he asked:

"Why would he do something like that?"

Did running away with the ingot mean that he was going to sell it to someone? Was it financial greed that made one of the Dwarven nation's councillors abandon his post?

For a moment, Ainz wanted to say that there was a player involved, moving their hidden pawns in the Dwarven nation. However, a player would not need an ingot like that. It was not valuable enough to make people forsake their position, even for very low-levelled players That being the case, it would have been more advantageous to keep their subordinate hidden and in a position of power.

"We don't know. We honestly do not know. None of us have any idea why he would perform such a rash act."

"...Then, my next question: what about the armor I requested?"

The Dwarves exchanged glances.

"...We cannot possibly apologize enough for that. While he left the shortsword, he took the ingot, and we are unable to return it to you. We have already sent out search parties and we will return it once we find it. Then, if you will permit it, please allow us to offer a substitute for the armor. While it pales in comparison to the ingot you entrusted to us, it is the greatest effort we can muster."

"We plan to prepare three sets of adamantite chainmail, and then enchant them to the best of our ability."

"If — if you desire a shield, we can fashion one for you out of orichalcum."

"Umu…"

Now if he were a malicious customer with a complaint, now would be the best time to make a scene. However, Ainz did not want to be such a customer.

Still, the loss of the ingot—

—Does it pain me? It's not rare; I have many more like it. ...And for all I know the metal isn't found here, but it might be obtainable in other regions. That being the case, it'll be better to have more suits of armor, right? They did say they were going to enchant them too… Plus, even if they do find that ingot, it's not like they're going to ask for all the other items back, right? That would make this a pretty good deal...

"...If you don't have it, it can't be helped. Then, let's leave matters at that. Discuss this with Zenberu later and prepare what he wants."

The Dwarves sighed in relief.

Should he have given them a harder time? Still, it would be bad if people doubted his kingliness due to his pettiness. In that case, perhaps accepting their offer would allow others to view him as a generous person.

Still, they ought to be alright with a request or two.

"...Then, may I add another request to that?"

"...What is it, Your Majesty?"

Their stiff voices implied indicated that they were all on guard against him.

"There is no need to be so tense. It isn't a big matter, after all. I simply wish your country's support for the matter of recruiting runesmiths."

"What, what do you mean by that?"

“Could you hold a ceremony in this country and make a public announcement about them working in my nation? That would surely make them happy.”

The Dwarves looked at each other and nodded instantly.

“Really now. Then please allow my nation to handle the matter of catering. Preparing for these will take some time, so I hope you won’t mind my staying here for a while.”

There were no objections from the Dwarves.

Ainz smiled in his heart. Now he would not need to return to E-Rantel.

At first, he thought he would have to spend more time on all this, but in the end he had taken back the Royal Capital in a flash. That was bad.

The first reason was because he wanted to inform Albedo about the Empire’s request for vassalage with [Message], so she could plan it with Demiurge. Things would be very bad if he were present. Therefore, Ainz needed a reason to not go back.

Also, he wanted to improve his friendly relationship with the Dwarves, which was also a very understandable reason.

Ainz also wanted to learn three pieces of information from the Dwarven city:

1: The presence or absence of players. If there were none now, there might still have been some around in the past.

2: Further investigation of runes and related information. He did not know enough about this topic. He had already learned quite a bit from the runesmiths; runes had been around for a long time, but it was unclear when exactly they had appeared and who had introduced them. Part of the reason was the chaos of the Demon Gods’ attack, but Hejinmal’s books did not contain any information on this, and neither did the Treasury.

3: Knowledge on smithing and ores. Now that he had enlisted the runesmiths to his cause, all he had to do was slowly tease that information out of them. However, there did not seem to be any of the prismatic ores here, as expected.

Regarding the second point, Ainz intended to have the Dwarves find out more when after they returned to the Royal Capital in the future, which was why he needed a firm friendship with them.

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The long lines of tables were set with many plates, each of which was laden with a sumptuous variety of dishes.

The piping hot food exuded a bewitching aroma, which drifted over to Ainz.

As one of the undead, Ainz had no desire for food, but the remnants of Suzuki Satoru did. His wish to try some and his curiosity over how it would taste pricked at him.

This body does have its good and bad points...

He could curb his hunger, but not his curiosity. After all, his curiosity was part of his mind, which was not affected by his undead body.

Perhaps if the dishes before him were made by the chefs of E-Rantel or Nazarick, it might not piqued his curiosity so, but these were made by Dwarves.

Since the runesmiths wanted to bring their entire families to the Sorcerous Kingdom, they had their wives, mothers, daughters and other female relatives cook for the event. Of course, most of the 2’000 shares of food here today were supplied by Ainz — by Nazarick.

Of course, Ainz was not a person who would use items wastefully, so most of these were essentially E-Rantel’s cuisine. The meat had been collected by the Dragons from this mountain range, while the wine had been sourced from the Kingdom and the Empire by those traders who remained in E-Rantel.

The tables were groaning with plates of food, but even now the ladies were still serving up the food they had made.

There was little difference in the external appearance of Dwarven males and females. The biggest difference lay in their beards. Male beards were very long, and they were typically woven into three braids, while female beards were sparser. That said, sparse still meant that their beards resembled those of human males. However, the ladies seemed to have a habit of trimming the whiskers under their noses.

I don't really see how it's a habit... Well, that's culture for you. The Sorcerous Kingdom has gathered all sorts of humanoids. Probing too deeply about this sort of thing might cause problems in the future.

Ainz turned his gaze away from the ladies who were still serving food. His eyes crossed the countless Dwarven heads before him and rested on the raised platform in front of him.

Some of the smiths bound for the Sorcerous Kingdom were standing with the members of the Council.

And then, the Council informed them about the migration to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

"It has begun."

"So it has."

The answer came from Gondo, who stood by Ainz's side.

"...You're their representative. Is it alright if you don't stand out there in front of them?"

"Give me a break, Your Majesty. I'm almost useless as a runesmith. It would be a shame to let someone like me represent them. ...Wouldn't you be a better choice, Your Majesty?"

Ainz and Gondo locked eyes for a moment, and then they chuckled.

Naturally, Ainz simply did not want to stand on the stage to meet and greet people. His earlier words were simply something he had forced out.

"Still…" Gondo's face turned serious. "I can't thank you enough, Your Majesty."

"Why is that?"

"This farewell party. Please look at the people on stage."

Ainz looked at the stage once more. They were not finished speaking, and that was all that came to mind. However, it would be a bit insensitive to say that he had not noticed anything after Gondo had brought it up.

"Umu… I see…"

In the end, he simply used the appropriate answer as a smokescreen.

"It is as Your Majesty surmises. Everyone's eyes have changed."

"Indeed, they have," Ainz replied without thinking, though he still had no idea what was going on. "Still, why is that?"

Gondo chuckled, like he found it amusing.

"It is the joy of feeling admiring gazes on them once more. Today's ceremony ― with dishes made with ingredients never seen before, as well as all kinds of alcohol ― was to let the runesmiths realize that they weren't being sold, but being hired by the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"I'll be expecting great things of them, you know?"

"Mm. I remember I once said that I would repay Your Majesty's kindness. That applies to the others as well. Thank you very much. Oops, looks like it's about time, Your Majesty."

After taking a large stein of beer from Gondo, he thumped it against the table like the others were doing. Ainz then raised a tiny cup of liquor in a toast, and then gave it back to Gondo because he could not drink it.

The Dwarves ― who had been holding themselves back all this while ― burst into activity. Many Dwarves flocked towards the food, gorging themselves nonstop with the dishes on display.

“What’s this? It’s amazing! Did your wife really make this?”

“Mm. His Majesty provided the ingredients. We had a lot of failures while trying it.”

“Mhm. It’s good, that’s a fact. But to an old fogey like me, it could stand to be a bit blander.”

“You’re meant to wash it down with wine.”

“What? Let me try… Ohoh! Incredible! The taste is just right!”

“The wine’s good too. I wonder if my wife could make this too?”

“It seems that the Sorcerous Kingdom will be sending us food for some time. Looks like we’ll be eating well, then.”

“I’d rather have their wine. This is from the Sorcerous Kingdom, right? Better be prepared to pay!”

They talked at the top of their voices as they ate. And then—

“I envy those runesmiths. They get to eat this sort of thing whenever they like?”

“No, these should be pretty expensive, right?”

“Doesn’t seem that way, does it? Look, in human countries, vegetables are cheap. Seems to be the same way with the Sorcerous Kingdom too.”

“Mm, they really are a fortunate lot. And, I only had a bit, but is it me or is the Sorcerous Kingdom’s wine top-notch stuff?”

“Umu. I only had a sip of that myself. Ahhhh, that was delicious. Still, grape wine is good; though maybe not that strong.”

“Don’t we have a reason to visit the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“I’ve heard tell that they’re planning to let the citizens of both countries move freely between them.”

“Oi oi, Everyone here’s pretty highly-placed, but shouldn’t you be more careful about letting that sort of thing get out?”

“Nah, seems they’re going to make a public announcement. In the future, this country will be active in a lot of places… and although this is just a rumor, they say that we took back the Royal Capital.”

“...Rumor has it that the Royal Palace was a nest of Dragons. The Sorcerous Kingdom is really amazing.”

Naturally, Ainz picked up on those words as well.

Rather than praise Ainz directly, their opinion of the Sorcerous Kingdom seemed to have gone up instead. That probably meant they could continue being friends in the future.

Ainz smiled in satisfaction, and turned to Gondo again.

“Go speak to them, Gondo. I may not be back for a while.”

“Is that so. ...Then I shall go talk with those chaps from the mines.”

Gondo was looking at a Dwarf with an evil look in his eyes.

“And what will you be doing, Your Majesty?”

“...A messenger from my country has come. I need to meet them. Then, see you again.”

Ainz raised his hand in farewell, and walked away.

He had originally been standing in a corner of a vast, spacious room. He opened the door to leave and headed for a guest reception room cum lounge room cum parlour.

It was quite a luxuriously furnished room, with tables, chairs, cabinets and the like. Demiurge was standing there.

“Forgive me for making you come all this way.”

“Certainly not. Your location is where I should be headed, Ainz-sama.”

Ainz walked across the room and sat in a chair. Then he bade Demiurge to take a seat as well.

“...I’ve seen the reports. I’m working here, so I must apologize for having you put them in writing instead of just delivering them by mouth.”

The reports in question detailed Demiurge’s preparations and activities in the Holy Kingdom. Of course, if he heard them from Demiurge himself, it might damage Ainz’s disguise. This had also been taken into consideration.

“...Even so, you’ve done well as I expected, Demiurge. Your accomplishments can only be described as outstanding.”

“Thank you very much, Ainz-sama.”

Demiurge bowed.

“Still, I could not hope to equal your feats, Ainz-sama… You have firmly secured a place in the Dwarves’ hearts.”

Ainz thought that he must surely be referring to how he reclaimed the Royal Capital, or recruiting the runesmiths. However, was that really the case?

“...Hm, so it seems you’ve seen through it already, Demiurge. Do you think the Dwarves have noticed?”

“Rather than notice it, I think they have no other alternative.”

Why wasn’t there anyone else here? If only there were, he could use his usual tactic. As Ainz studied Demiurge in detail, he noticed a smile on his face.

...What’s so funny?!

Demiurge's smile made Ainz's nonexistent stomach ache. Albedo's smile was similarly terrifying. The idea that they might have seen through his act made his nonexistent heart pound faster.

"If… if the Dwarves see through it, what do you think I should do?"

"I doubt that will be a big problem. After all, you did provide the catering for the runesmiths' farewell party. With that, you can shrug off anything the Dwarves say."

...What's he talking about?

"I trust it's not important, then."

Now that his attempts to lead Demiurge on had failed, Ainz decided to leave it at that. Asking too much about an intelligent person like him was very dangerous.

"Then, how goes the vassalization of the Empire?"

"Yes. Albedo and I have discussed the matter and we have drawn up a draft. After that, we hope you will look over it and share your opinions with us."

If Demiurge and Albedo finished it together, then I won't need to step in. Ainz thought that, but did not say it.

"...Have you given the Empire enough benefits? Enough that the neighboring countries will look at the Empire and think, 'life will be good for us once we become vassals of the Sorcerous Kingdom', or something along those lines?"

"It will be fine."

Ainz muttered "Yes" in his heart. In that case, he could give it his OK without even looking at the draft.

"Even so, your achievements in the Dwarven Kingdom and the Empire were truly breathtaking. I imagine the term 'fathomless wisdom' exists to describe you, Ainz-sama."

“Certainly not. I’m confident you could have done this easily as well, Demiurge.”

Demiurge revealed a rare expression — a bitter smile. Then she shook his head.

“Indeed, if that was all. Even so, how far into the future have you predicted the course of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

Not even tomorrow. But of course, he could not say that.

Ainz wondered what sort of answer would fit the style of a ruler. Just then, he remembered a guild name from YGGDRASIL.

It was called Millenium Kingdom.

If only the Sorcerous Kingdom could really last a thousand years. Perhaps it was because of that thought, but a relevant memory came to mind.

He had no idea why the guild’s emblem was that of a crane, and so Ainz had asked Yamaiko about it. After that, she told him that it was because Cranes were said to live for a thousand years in mythology. Similarly, tortoises would live for—

“—Ten thousand years.”

Ainz frowned as the words slipped out. He had accidentally overstated the scale. Just as Ainz hurriedly looked toward Demiurge, intending to correct himself, he realized that it was already too late.

“To, to think your plans were of such a grand scope...”

Demiurge’s eyes went wide, and those jewel-like pupils of his shone even brighter.

Ah, this is bad.

“I was kid—”

“—That being the case, things like spreading the undead around must surely be to encourage the other nations to rely on you rather than viewing our troops as dangerous elements, Ainz-sama. That must be the right answer for someone who views the world from such a wide angle. Still… how fearsome you are…”

Ainz did not know what he was saying, but he knew there was only one thing he could do at this point. *“Well done, Demiurge, you have completely anticipated my plans, as I expected.”* However, he could not use that tactic all the time. Therefore, this time, he would say—

“Fufufu, I haven’t thought that far ahead, Demiurge.”

“...Is that so. Understood. I shall carve this matter into my heart.”

As he saw Demiurge’s gentle smile, Ainz’s heart flooded with cold sweat.

Eh? What? What’s going on? ...I’m not too sure, but doesn’t this mean I’m in an even more precarious situation now?

However, Ainz had not thought of any solutions. Then, he would have to deal with it with a fake smile.

“Fufufu… I’ll leave it to you then, Demiurge.”

“Fufufu… Understood, Ainz-sama.”

In contrast, Demiurge’s smile shone even brighter than before.

Even though he wanted to cry, Ainz managed to pull himself together enough to ask a question in a trembling voice.

“...Then, Demiurge. About the report you sent… when do you think it will take place?”

“It will begin in the fall, but I shall have to trouble you in the winter, Ainz-sama. The beginning should be fine, but once the opposition makes their move as well, there might be some discrepancies even if we manage to manipulate them."

"Well, you did plan this after all, Demiurge. I can leave it to you in peace."

"Thank you very much, Ainz-sama. As for the matter of the Empire's vassalization—"

"—I'll listen in detail once I return. Can you give me a copy of the plan first?"

"Understood."

"...Then, I look forward to how this project of yours will unfold, Demiurge."

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

EPILOGUE

It was morning when Enri woke up. She quietly left the bed, so as not to wake her husband who was still asleep beside her. The air outside was very cold, and it made her want to get back into the bed that was still warm from their two bodies.

The bed creaked as she rose, but her husband of half a year was too tired to react. He slept like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Now that Enri managed his life for him, he kept a more regular schedule. Thus, his deep slumber was simply because that was the way he was.

...Although it didn't use to be like this.

When they had just gotten married, he had not slept this soundly.

Maybe he was nervous… But now he's used to it, so that's good.

Enri yawned and stretched.

Her bare breasts jiggled.

Enri's face flushed pink, and she reached for a piece of discarded clothing.

Granted, only Enri and her husband lived in this house, but this was hardly presentable.

If her little sister Nemu were here, she would definitely not be dressed like this. However, Nemu would not wake up here — in the Emmott house — but in the Bareare house.

Let’s not disturb the newlyweds, her mother-in-law Lizzie had said. Nemu had listened because they had decided not to rebuild the Emmott or Bareare houses. And so, this had happened.

It had been two years since the incident where they had lost both their parents. That said, Nemu was still scarred by the incident and was unwilling to leave her big sister at night. It was only by the grace of some unknowable instinct that she had managed to accept the new arrangement.

Since Enri lived in a farming village, she often saw animals engaging in *those* activities. She might also have heard about what young couples did when they vanished into the forest after leaving the dancing circle on harvest festival nights. Before she realised it, she had also learned what husbands and wives did at night.

However, nobody had explained it to her in detail before. Enri and Nemu were not old enough to have heard such things. Still, someone needed to teach her what to do, but knowledge was as much a poison as a cure.

Lupusregina-san does say a lot of weird things...

Everyone in the village treated the aide of the nation’s ruler with respect. Enri was one of them as well. However, they could not fully accept every aspect of her personality. Over the long time they had known each other, Enri had realised one thing: Lupusregina was a criminal who delighted in people’s reactions to her crimes, and she was the type who could watch someone fall into a trap with a smile on her face.

Enri had the feeling if she did not go out and say, “Please teach me”, Lupusregina would not teach her anything concrete.

On the other hand, if she did not keep an eye on Nemu before she spoke to Lupusregina, Enri had the feeling that Lupusregina would describe all sorts of things to Nemu in exacting and loving detail.

I can teach you all sorts of adult things any time you like. Enri had not forgotten those words from Lupusregina.

After making up her mind to find Lupusregina, Enri picked up her clothes which had fallen to the floor, and put them on.

After that, she headed for the kitchen, and turned the tap on.

She collected the water which flowed out in a small container. She turned the faucet in the opposite direction once it was full, and the water stopped flowing.

In the past, she had woken up early to draw water from the well. Now, she could use this magic item to obtain fresh water. Its temperature stayed the same even in freezing or warm seasons.

This magic item, the Faucet of Spring Water, could make 200 litres of water a day. Apparently, it had been designed by the sage of a certain country.

This was not a common item, even in big cities. She had heard that there were certain places where gigantic versions of this item served as a city's water supply.

Enri wiped herself down with a moist towel.

"Uuuu, it's cold."

While the water's temperature was fixed, one would still lose a lot of heat from wet skin if the air was cold. However, Enri grit her teeth and bore with it, then rubbed herself down with the towel. She had done so before she slept, but still she did it again.

Enri still remembered that incident — when Lupusregina had called out to her while humming, a playful grin on her face — and vowed that she would never drop her guard.

Still, magic items were really great.

Enri had thought that countless times.

Carne Village had a lot of residents now.

Over 90% of them belonged to the Goblin Army Enri had summoned, and this village could not support all of them.

The first problem was accommodation.

The Goblins had solved that by chopping down logs from the Great Forest of Tob and building simple housing. However, the problems of insufficient food and water were harder to deal with.

Their initial solution to the lack of food was the produce of the forest, but they could not forage enough to support all the Goblins. Therefore, they had asked Lupusregina for help, and in return they had received food aid. Of course, that food was only borrowed and would have to be paid back, though fortunately there was no deadline attached.

The next problem was a lack of water. In the past, the village well had been sufficient, given that there had not been that many people. But now that the amount of people in the village had increased so drastically, they had to set up a roster to draw water all day long.

Even then, they could not collect enough water, so they had to dig new wells very far away. If they dug them nearby, they would be tapping the same water source, and there was no telling if the wells would dry up.

Fortunately, the Dwarves who had moved to this village had solved that problem.

They had come in the summer, and during the course of fall and winter, they had become close friends.

Are those people still making new magic items?

Until about two months ago, the sound of explosions and flashes of light had been a common occurrence, but now everything had settled down. At most, some of them would drink outside and get into fights, but that was all.

The existence of the Dwarves was now an integral part of the village’s functioning.

In the past, there had been no blacksmiths in Enri's village. Thus, she had to go to the city to buy tools, or beg the very rare travelling blacksmiths to make them for her.

There had been a blacksmith in the Goblin Army she had summoned, but having him bear the heavy burden of the village's repair work would surely lead to problems. And then, the Dwarves had appeared, and they had taken up that job.

The most important thing was that their loyalty to the Sorcerer King rivalled that of the humans from Carne Village. This village had been saved several times by the magic caster who became the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown. Anyone who heard someone badmouthing His Majesty would immediately go up and beat the offender into a pulp.

The Dwarves seemed to feel the same way, and they often said things like, "That celebration made me feel proud of myself again" "Did you see how jealous they were?" "Drinking time!" and so on while they imbibed. Enri did not quite understand what they were talking about, but they could feel their gratitude to the Sorcerer King in their words, so the villagers opened their hearts to them.

After she was finished, Enri put on her clothes.

Her husband did not seem to have woken up yet, so she decided to get the chores done.

Until recently, her husband had been handling the task of potion-making. But recently, he had stopped working on such tasks. Instead, he was involved in the storage and preservation of herbs, which would be important in the future now that the village's population had increased. In addition, he also helped with Enri's work as village chief. He worked hard for the village, so she had to work hard for him too.

After stepping outside, the familiar scenery — that of the ever-growing Carne Village — came into view. Carne was now larger than an ordinary village because the Goblins Enri had summoned had added their own living quarters to it.

“Alright then...”

Enri clenched her fist.

In order to make breakfast, she had to draw the ingredients from the food store.

“Good morning, General-kakka.”

The form of a black-clad Goblin emerged from a murky shadow.

This was something she saw every morning, so Enri replied without any surprise:

“Good morning. Nice weather we’re having.”

“It is as you say, General-kakka. According to the Goblin Weather Forecaster, it seems it will be sunny all day long.”

“Really?”

Enri had long since abandoned any resistance to being called General.

She had told them countless times that she was not a General, but the message had not gotten through. At this point, being the Village Chief was pretty much the same as being the General, so she had decided to accept it.

Incidentally, there was a unit called the Goblin Rear Echelon Support Unit. It was populated by people with rare vocations. Apart from the Goblin Weather Forecaster, there was also the Goblin Strategist, Goblin Blacksmith and so on, for a total of 12 jobs.

“Oh, General-kakka, it seems your bodyguard has arrived. Your servant shall now excuse himself.”

The black-clad Goblin faded back into the Shadows, and the familiar Redcap took his place by Enri’s side.

Personally, Enri did not like the Redcaps. They had an evil look on their faces; in short, they were very scary.

In the past, Jugem had accompanied her, but as the former troop leader, he was now one of the many managers of the greatly-expanded Goblin force.

In truth, the duty of escorting her should have fallen to the silver-armored Goblins after his departure, but for various reasons, the Redcaps had ended up filling that role.

Frankly speaking, there's no need for escorts or whatnot.

She did not think anyone could evade the Goblins' eyes and reach the heart of the village, but she could not completely ignore their worries.

Trailed by the Redcap, she headed toward the larder that adjoined her house.

She opened the door and saw a cramped place packed with barrels and bottles, with many glass flasks lining the shelves. In its depths was a small mountain of grain, and hanging from the rafters were bales of sweetgrass and jerky.

The reason why they had so much food was because the Goblins had put a lot of effort into breaking ground and opening up new fields.

Currently, there were a lot of new crop fields surrounding the village in a large radius. While repaying the food they had borrowed would be difficult, they were at least self-sufficient for this year. In addition, they had captured chicken-like monsters and tried breeding them. If all went well, they would be able to fully repay the food they had borrowed.

After selecting the ingredients for today's meal, Enri headed back outside.

There was a massive wall in the corner of her vision.

It might have been within the village, but the wall was not made of wood. It protected the Dwarven workshops, and standing sentry within it was the Death Knight who had slaughtered the knights that had terrorized Carne Village in the past.

The wall which enclosed the Dwarven ateliers had been personally raised by the ruler of this nation and the savior of this village, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. "Its purpose is to minimize the damage caused to the surrounding village when their experiments fail," he had said.

She had wondered if they could not simply build it outside the village, but obviously she could not say such a thing to His Majesty.

"I wonder what magic items the Dwarf-sans are working on now?"

"Shall we investigate?"

"I've told you before, you can't."

While nobody had told her what the Dwarves were working on in their workshops, she was confident that it would not harm the village. Enri could accept that.

Should she try to stealthily gather information about them? The Goblins had suggested that several times in the past, but Enri had always shut down those suggestions with ironclad finality.

Carne Village's savior, Ainz Ooal Gown had said that he wanted the village to accept these Dwarves. At the same time, he had told them that what they were working on was top secret.

Even if he was an undead being who hated the living, he was still the magic caster who had saved the village several times, and so they trusted him more than anyone alive.

Just then, the Redcap slid in front of Enri. They only did that under certain circumstances.

Enri shifted her line of sight and saw the familiar form of a beautiful woman, who was surrounded by four Redcaps.

"Hiya, En-chan. How ya doin'~"

"Ah, good morning, Lupusregina-san."

Things had been like this ever since the person called Lupusregina met the Goblins. The Redcaps were few in number, but whenever Lupusregina showed up, they appeared in groups. In addition, they wielded weapons that they would not normally carry around.

It was said that there were other Goblins present in the vicinity besides the Redcaps, but Enri had never seen them before.

Even Enri could tell that the reason why they had gone to such lengths was because the Redcaps — no, the Goblins were wary of Lupusregina. That said, Lupusregina might be a mystery, but Enri did not think that she would do anything to a village which hosted a bronze statue of her master. In addition, she had saved Enri and Nfirea's life in the past.

On the contrary, Enri could not help but worry that this would upset her.

She had spoken to the Goblin Strategist and he had said that he would talk to them about it, but it would seem nothing had come of that thus far.

The sole saving grace was that when she had told Lupusregina about this, she told Enri not to worry about it.

"I've only been here a while and already there's people dashing out. Poor me~"

"There's no way we wouldn't be on guard against you when you arrive in that way. You should know that."

The answer came from one of the Redcaps surrounding Lupusregina.

His voice was calm, but there was a clear sense of wariness in his voice.

"Ah!" Enri raised her voice as she considered that the situation was developing in a bad direction. "How exactly *did* you come here, anyway?"

"Hm? I took Flatchest Vampire Airlines Frost 05, from Nazarick to Carne~"

“Eh? Flatchest Vampire Airlines?”

“Yup. It’s the name of the person in charge of all outdoor movement~”

“Pettan Ketsuki Koukuu-san, then?”

“Yup. Pretty much, Oh, and if you meet her in person, just tell her I said it. Or rather, I hope you’ll mention my name. Otherwise, who knows what’ll happen to you~”

As she looked on Enri’s puzzled face, Lupusregina broke into a smile.

“En-chan, you’re really funny. Really, you’re quite interesting…” Lupusregina’s eyes narrowed in an instant. “Really~”

Lupusregina’s bright red tongue peeked out from her slightly opened mouth and licked her lips.

It was not a seductive gesture. However, Enri felt something crawl up her lower back.

In that moment, the Redcap standing by her sprang into action.

He pulled Enri back and slid into the gap — in front of Lupusregina — which had appeared.

In this highly tense atmosphere, Lupusregina shrugged, wearing her rarely-seen serious face.

“...I won’t do anything to her~ Is that enough to calm you down? Still, if you don’t believe me, why don’t you all come at once and have a go? That way, I can deal with you without holding back.”

The Redcap lowered his head, and returned to his original position.

“—And that’s that. By the way, Frost refers to Frost Dragons.”

“Frost—Dragons?! By Dragons you mean the Dragons from legend, right? Amazing! Are those Dragons Gown-sama’s servants as well?”

“Yup. Air transport is flourishing in the Sorcerous Kingdom~”

“That’s amazing!”

Enri’s eyes were sparkling.

The Dragons in question were incredibly powerful monsters sung about in legends. Anyone who could subjugate them was no ordinary magic caster.

“Gown-sama is really amazing!”

“...Well, that’s true,”

A troubled expression came over Lupusregina’s face.

“A Dragon like that… hm~ someone like me… Well, it’s fine~”

There were some things Enri wanted to ask, but since she seemed to have come to terms with things, it was alright. Probably.

“Ah, why did you come around today?”

“Ah, yes, yes. Hm… I might not be able to come by for a while. I came to tell you that I hope you can take care of yourself.”

They had known each other for over a year, but this was the first time she had said such a thing.

“What happened?”

“Hm~ I guess it’s okay to tell you, En-chan. Actually, it seems Ainz-sama was defeated in battle and died.”

Enri pondered the meaning of those words, and then their meaning sank in.

Her response was equally understandable.

“EHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH?!”

Postscript by So-bin

Bar Nazarick
BEER

I CAN REALLY FEEL
CHAGAMA AND PERORON
FROM AURA AND SHALLTEAR.
I WANT A BEER.
So-bin

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

AFTERWORD

This is Volume 11, the longest one of all. Did it excite you? Books get tiring to carry when they're heavy and I'd like to avoid that, so why did it end up so long… And if I were to cut pages, where should I cut from? By the way, this has already been heavily cut down from the original proofreading. It feels like there were at least six more pages before… Hm. I guess there wasn't much of a change, after all.

Well, please forgive me and just think of this as a form of savings, then. I think in the future, the volumes will only be 300 pages long. When that happens, please don't think "so thin!", but instead consider that the use of what's been saved until now. After all, it'll still be quite thick if you average all the books out.

Then, let's think about other things -- I'm writing this on a hot summer day. The AC in my room is working at full blast and saving Maruyama from the scorching fires of hell.

I hate summer. When I walk to the office, there's nothing I hate more than touching other people with my sweaty body. *"I won't touch you, so don't touch me,"* I scream internally. The only salvation is that the decrease in students means the trains aren't so packed. On that note, winters are great! I want to sleep under the blanket and never get out! ...Well, the people in Hokkaido and Tohoku might not think that way, but Maruyama still wants to say; Winters Are The Best!

It seems the Overlord Compilation Movie will be made in the Best Season! For some reason, it seems Maruyama has to work hard… I'll work hard. And that's that. There should be more news coming out in future, and I'd be happy if you could look forward to it.

I've given a lot of people this time round too. So-bin-sama, I made you redraw the insert images several times, thank you very much. To my editor Ohakusama, I’ll reduce the pagecount for sure next time! And thank you for doing the design for the deluxe edition package this time round, Chord Design Studio-sama.

Then there’s Ashina-san and the staff; just hand the gags to them and it’ll be alright.

(Please watch the deluxe edition if you bought it, everyone)

F-ta-sama, let’s meet up to discuss how to cut down the page count.

And a big thank you to my readers who have finished this (very thick) light novel!

2016 September
Maruyama Kugane

二〇一六年九月 丸山くがね

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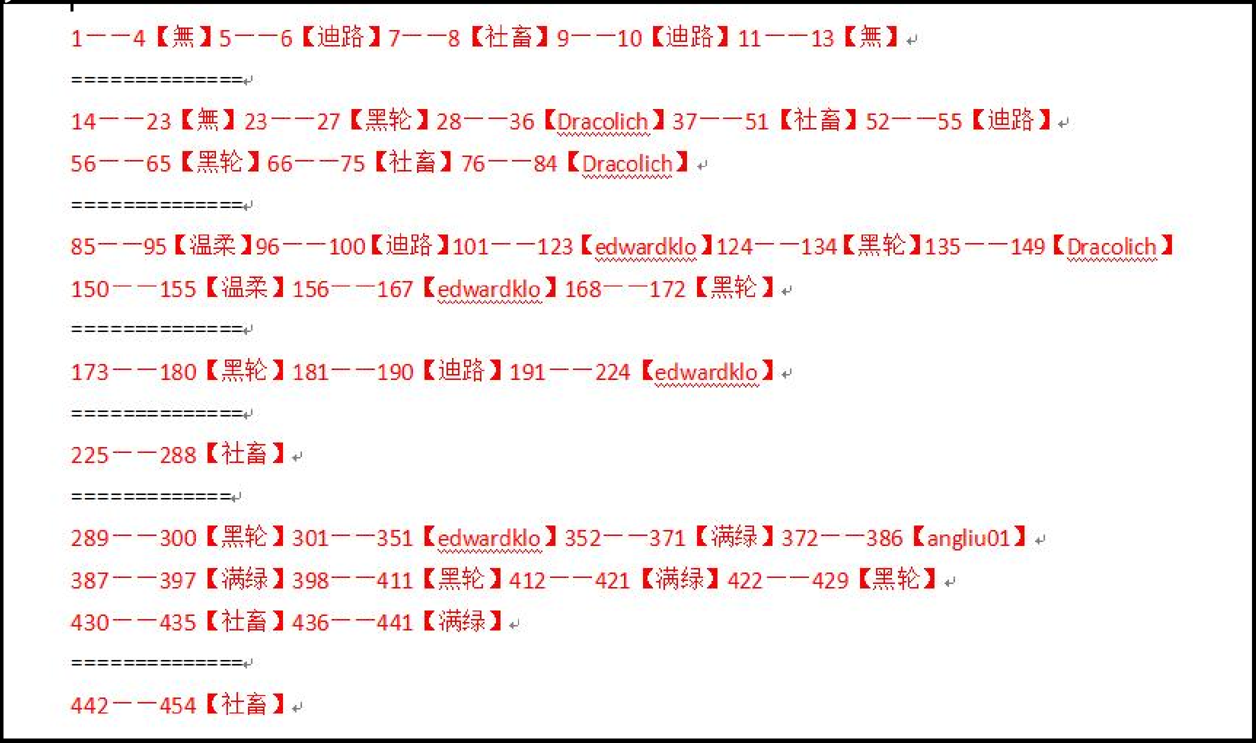

1——4【無】5——6【迪路】7——8【社畜】9——10【迪路】11——13【無】

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14——23【無】23——27【黑轮】28——36【Dracolich】37——51【社畜】52——55【迪路】

56——65【黑轮】66——75【社畜】76——84【Dracolich】

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85——95【温柔】96——100【迪路】101——123【edwardklo】124——134【黑轮】135——149【Dracolich】

150——155【温柔】156——167【edwardklo】168——172【黑轮】

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173——180【黑轮】181——190【迪路】191——224【edwardklo】

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225——288【社畜】

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289——300【黑轮】301——351【edwardklo】352——371【满绿】372——386【angliu01】

387——397【满绿】398——411【黑轮】412——421【满绿】422——429【黑轮】

430——435【社畜】436——441【满绿】

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442——454【社畜】

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